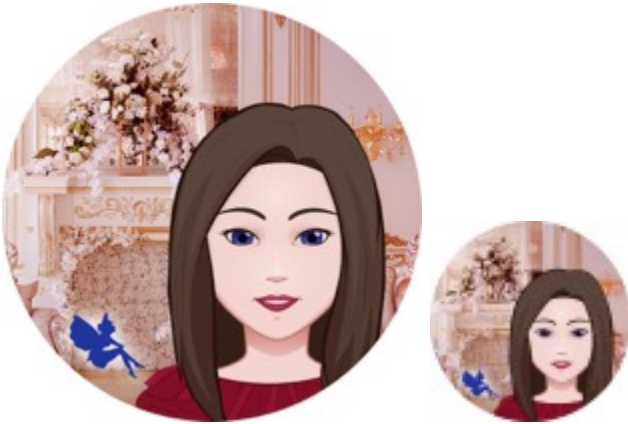


A Porcelain Viscountess
A Historical Regency Romance Novel

Hazel Linwood



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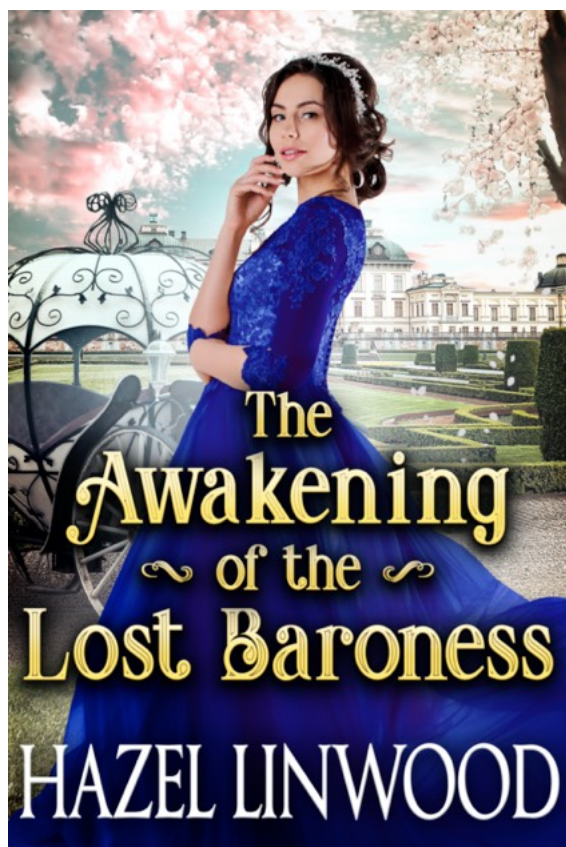
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About the Author

A Lovely Gift From Me to You

I am so grateful that you have joined me on this journey of mine. Having you beside me is a dream come true for me!

In a way for me to thank you for your support, I am offering you a **free book**. ***The Awakening of the Lost Baroness*** is only available to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by clicking the image below or [this link here!](#)



Thank you for being by my side!

Hazel Linwood



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About the Book

“Take my hand and we’ll make it - I swear”

Phoebe Colborne, the Viscountess of Ridlington, is in turmoil. Her husband is a terrible man, who never misses a chance to embarrass, and terrify her. Desperate for a way out, she accepts her friend’s offer for help, no matter the cost...

Francis Gibbs, the Duke of Hayward, has sworn to never marry. Uninterested in any of the Ton’s happenings, he visits London after years of absence to see his beloved sister. When she asks a favor of him, though, he fears he might be going too far. For she’s asking him to shelter a married woman from her own husband...

Just as life starts to seem hopeful again for Phoebe, her old nightmares surface again. The demons of her past will not accept her happiness, and will do anything to grab her back in their claws. Francis must make an impossible decision soon: how far is he willing to go to protect the woman his heart is beating for, even if she isn’t his to begin with?

Chapter 1

“What in God’s name are you wearing?”

Phoebe looked up as she reached the bottom step of the staircase. Her husband, Graham Colborne, the Viscount Ridlington, was standing in the middle of the entrance hall and staring at her with perfect shock set in his features.

Phoebe tried to stop the trembling of her hands that she always felt around him. She stepped away from the staircase and made to walk past her husband toward the front door.

“It is called a dress,” she said very quietly, half hoping he wouldn’t hear her. She had learned before not to talk back to him; it never ended well, yet the temptation was there all the same. Her heels clicked on the black and white tiled floor as she walked past him, echoing back at her off the mahogany wooden paneled walls.

In truth, she hated the house. Everything about it was dark, painted black or deep brown, a little like how she imagined the insides of her husband’s heart to look.

“What did you say?” Graham snatched her wrist as she walked past, stopping her from going any further.

“Ow,” she said quietly, trying not to make too loud a pained sound. If she did, he would only hurt her more. He used the pincer-like grip on her hand to tow her back toward him until she collided against his chest.

“What did you say?” he said again, clearly expecting an answer. His long auburn hair was tied up into a slick ponytail at the back of his head, and his almost black eyes were pinned on her, the anger in them plain without him having to raise his voice.

"It is just a dress," she said, lifting her chin toward him. "What is wrong with it?"

"You dare to ask that?" he asked. The grip on her wrist became even more painful as he dragged her across the entrance hall.

She breathed a sigh of relief, thankful to no longer be so close to him, even if that relief was momentary. As he dragged her across the hall, she caught sight of the butler and the footman standing by the front door, purposely with their backs turned toward her.

Why do you always pretend it is not happening? She thought angrily. It was always the same. The Viscount's staff pretended they did not know about his cruelty. The only person who acknowledged it in that house was her maid and closest friend.

"Look. Look at yourself!" Graham ordered. He spun her round forcefully, changing his hold so that his pincer-like grip was on her upper arms as he forced her to look in the mirror. "What do you see there? Do you see the Viscountess Ridlington? Or do you see a bawd?"

"A bawd!?" she repeated in horror, looking down at the gown. She already knew there was nothing wrong with the dress, nothing at all. It was a fine pale blue gown that was gathered high on her waist with a deep neckline and short fashionable sleeves. The entire outfit was fashionable for the time, and hardly revealing. Above the dress, she could see her panicked face staring back at herself. Her light brown hair was beginning to fall out of its updo, her bold lips were trembling, and her green eyes were watery. "There is nothing wrong with it."

"You are arguing with me?" he asked, leaning his head down toward her and connecting their gazes in the mirror. She shuddered at his touch. "Anyone would think you are trying to take a lover. Look how deep the neckline is." He went to grab the neckline of the dress.

She tried her best to wriggle out of his arms, fighting against him.

How has it escalated to this?

In her panic, she managed to stop him from adjusting the neckline and grabbing her gown, but instead he took hold of her upper arms, forcing her back against him and looking at herself in the mirror another time. She breathed heavily, trying to keep a lid on her fear.

“You want a lover, don’t you? That’s why you would dress this way. You would *humiliate* me so,” he leered in her ear, his lips so close to her skin that she veered away, trying her best not to be touched by him.

She had already shared his bed too many times for her liking. Whenever she was touched by him, even simple touches, made her run from him, repulsed.

“I will not have my wife be so disloyal,” he said, standing straight.

“I am not being disloyal,” she pleaded for him to understand, finding her voice. “It is just a dress. It is of the fashion, I thought you would like that. I didn’t choose it to embarrass you in anyway —”

“And you think I’d believe that?” he asked, cutting her off.

“I’ll change,” she said quickly. “I will go and change now. Please... just release me.” She knew she was begging. His fingers were clenched so deeply on her upper arms that he would undoubtedly leave bruises. She had no choice but to opt for a dress at the very least had long sleeves, to hide the marks.

“You’ll change into something demure,” he ordered her. “Something that does not belong on a bawd in a brothel. Understood?”

She saw no point in arguing with him further, so she just nodded. Arguing with him would only incur more of his anger, and maybe even more bruises.

"I'll go change now," she stammered, tired of having to suffer her own fear. He released her, allowing her to stumble away. In her effort to be far from him, she tripped on the hem of her dress. She fell to the floor, hands planted on the diamond-shaped black tiles.

"Pathetic," he murmured behind her. She tried to move to her knees and stand again when she abruptly felt a hand on the back of her dress.

"Graham, no!" she pleaded. He was using the dress to tug her back to her feet, it pulled awfully on her corset, restricting her breathing.

She had never known this fear before of him. She had always been afraid of him, since the day her father had announced the betrothal, but since their marriage, every day it had grown worse and worse. Never before though had he constricted her breathing. She wasn't even sure he knew that was what he was doing, the point was he didn't care enough to notice. He just tossed her around like she was some kind of ivory doll that one would buy for a child to play with.

Instinctively, as she stood straight, she kicked out at him. Her foot made contact with his, forcing him to release her. She stumbled away, breathing deeply around the corset.

"You have spirit tonight, don't you?" he asked rhetorically as he walked toward her. "You do not usually fight back," he whispered, making a grab for her.

"No," she dived away, only just escaping his hold. "I'll go change now, Graham. I promise, I will only be a few minutes. I give you my word." She ran up the stairs as fast as she could, gathering the skirt of the gown and holding it around her ankles as she ran.

Behind her on the stairs, she could hear Graham following her, taking the steps two or maybe even three at a time. When she reached the top of the stairs, she didn't look back to him. She just concentrated on running, all the way to her chamber.

As she burst through the door, she found her maid inside, Louisa,

tidying up. The young fair-haired woman's head snapped toward her, eyes wide with fear, suggesting she could hear Graham's footsteps running down the corridor too.

"Louisa, quick, find me another gown," Phoebe ran inside. "Anything with a high neckline and long sleeves. Ah!" She couldn't help yelping as the door burst open. Phoebe backed away from the door as Louisa ran to the cupboard nearby, pulling out a gown.

Graham hurried toward Phoebe, backing her up against the chest of drawers nearby. She collided with it, barely aware how close it was in her desperation to be away from her husband.

"I'm changing now," she said quickly. "I'll be ready in just a few minutes. Please, Graham."

It didn't matter how many times she pleaded with him. Graham marched toward her and grabbed hold of her skirt. With one hard tug, he pulled at the material, ripping it.

"Graham!" she cried at him, but it did little use. He started to grab different parts of the dress, ripping it at a piece at a time in a frenzy. "Please, stop."

Phoebe could barely see over Graham's flailing arms, but she could just make out Louisa on the far side of the room with a new dress in her hands. The poor maid's lip was shaking, and she had turned pale, watching what was happening.

"Please, my lord, stop," Louisa started to walk across the room.

"Be quiet!" Graham snapped over his shoulder.

"Louisa, get back," Phoebe begged her maid to abide by her wishes. It was always a fear that her husband would turn his anger on Louisa instead of her. The thought was too horrific. Just because she suffered at Graham's hands didn't mean that anyone else should. "Graham, please."

Her begging was left unanswered. He just continued to rip her dress until her corset was exposed and the sleeves were torn off her body. She pushed against his chest, trying to find some strength to save herself from him, but he was far taller than her and outmatched her in strength by far. At her shove, he pushed one of her hands away and then laid that hand against her throat.

She fell still as he pinned her back against the chest of drawers, fixing her in place. She tried to breathe deeply around his hand, but the effort was now strained. She stopped fighting him and just stayed perfectly still. The only movement was in her eyes as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She didn't try to stop them, what would be the point?

He was evidently unmoved by her tears. He was staring back at her, his cheeks almost as red as his auburn hair from the animation of his attack on her. He moved his face toward her as he held her in place with her throat.

"I will not have a disobedient wife," he whispered with venom in her ear.

Phoebe closed her eyes, feeling the fear ricochet through her body so much that her legs were wobbling beneath her, and her palms were clammy.

One of these days, he may end up killing me.



* * *

Francis arrived at his sister's house with a spring in his step. He hadn't seen Diana for months, not whilst he had been travelling across the continent, nor her husband, his good friend the Marquess of Dodge. As he waited for the door of the townhouse in London to

open, he leaned on the doorframe, listening to the voices beyond.

“That will be him!” He could hear Diana’s voice calling excitedly. “He’s here at last. Jenkins, don’t worry, you do not need to get the door. I’ll answer this one.” She clearly addressed the butler with her last statement.

“You’re running like an excited puppy,” her husband was chuckling at her.

“He’s my brother, I haven’t seen him in almost a year. How else do you expect me to behave?” she laughed just as she flung open the door. “Francis!” She burst out of the door and barreled into Francis’ arms.

He was so startled he nearly fell down the front porch steps as he caught her. He laughed too, amazed at his sister’s strength in her delight to see him again.

She looked up at him, her smile even wider than his. The blue eyes they shared were darting up and down his figure now, clearly trying to take him in.

“You look tanned, and very happy,” she said, smiling up at him. Unlike himself, her hair was a touch lighter than his, with dark brown hair swept up into an ornate updo.

“You look...incredibly regal,” he said and held out his sister’s hands, examining her dress as she led him into the house. “Well, the Marchioness of Dodge certainly has some fine clothes now.”

“You are too kind to me,” she said, taking his arm as she led him further into the entrance hall. “Why did you not tell me you were back sooner? Your note said you arrived yesterday.”

“Yesterday evening. I needed sleep after the journey,” Francis hurried to explain. “If I had come to see you then I merely would have fallen asleep on your settee.”

“Well, we would have thrown a blanket over you,” Josiah’s voice urged Francis to look around. His good friend and brother-in-law was standing before him with his hand outstretched. Francis eagerly took Josiah’s hand for a shake. “How are you?”

“I miss travelling already,” he said with a dramatic sigh.

“You have only just got back!” Diana pointed out with evident affront. “Or are we really so boring that you would tire of us so quickly?”

“Do not be silly,” Francis said with a laugh. “Of course, I am delighted to see you again, and I missed you dearly.”

“That’s more like it,” she said, squeezing his arm. “Say more things like that and I’ll be asking you to stay in England forever more.”

“That, I cannot do,” he admitted wryly, much to her upset. It was what he did, and what he loved. A life seeing new places, adventuring and seeing what the world had to offer. Who wouldn’t want that life? “I will be in London for a few months, but I will soon be back to the continent again.”

“We must get you married,” Josiah said jovially, “then that will give you a reason to stay.”

“Oh, do not get us started back on that old argument,” Diana declared, throwing her hands up in surrender. Francis couldn’t blame her for wishing to avoid the subject. It was a topic he avoided at all costs himself.

I will never marry. He had once quite liked the idea, but that was many years ago. No woman had turned his head for some time, and he certainly could not picture binding himself forever to any woman he had ever met. No, a single life was for him, one where he could adventure the world alone and free.

“We must get ready soon,” Josiah said, picking out a pocket watch

from his waistcoat and checking the time.

“Francis, do say you will come with us tonight,” Diana pleaded, already heading toward the stairs to change.

“Come with you?” he asked, startled. “I came this evening to see you. At home.”

“Well, we will not be here,” Diana pointed out. “If you want to see us, you will have to come with us on our outing.”

Francis shifted between his feet uncomfortably, noticing as Josiah watched him, chuckling.

“I see you haven’t changed,” Josiah whispered to him.

“You know I do not like the events of the ton,” Francis complained quietly.

“It is the done thing when you’re in London,” Josiah pointed out with a sigh.

“So, Francis? Are you coming with us?” Diana asked, pausing and turning to look back at him halfway up the stairs.

He had travelled a long way to see his sister and his friend. He may resent the events of the ton and find them quite odious, but he was not going to miss out on the opportunity to see his sister.

“Very well, I’ll come,” he agreed, watching as Diana jumped for joy on the stairs.

“You have made her as happy as marchpane does,” Josiah said beside him with a laugh.

“Where is it we are going then?” Francis asked.

Chapter 2

“You look like a deer caught at the end of a hunter’s arrow,” Graham whispered in Phoebe’s ear with his hand firmly on her arm. “Smile, for god’s sake.”

She pinned a false smile in place and was led by him into the Argyll Rooms for the assembly. The moment they were through the door, Graham adjusted his hold on her, looping their arms together so no one would be able to see the way he’d been hurting her.

Phoebe was thankful for the new gown Louisa had picked out for her. Standing pinned to the chest of drawers with Graham’s hand around her throat, she had thought for one horrific moment that he would squeeze, but he didn’t. He’d merely released her and demanded she changed.

Now, she was wearing one of the demurest dresses she owned. It was long sleeved with a high neckline and made the heat of the assembly rooms even more insufferable than they would have been in the dress her husband destroyed. She pulled out the fan Louisa had packed for her and started fluttering her face with it, trying to cool down a little.

“Put that away,” Graham said tightly as he led her through the tightly packed crowd, toward the center of the room.

“Why?” she asked, earning a sharp gaze from him.

“Do you wish to defy me again?” he said quietly. She closed the fan instantly and let it hang around her wrist, limply. “Such things can be used to send secret messages. If you have a lover, I do not want you to be communicating with him when I cannot see it.”

A lover... Phoebe thought long and hard on the word. She couldn’t

imagine ever trusting a man enough to fall in love with him. The men she had known best in the world, her father and now Graham, had showed to her how cruel men could be. *I will never take a lover.*

Phoebe tried to turn her attention to the room itself. The walls were plastered a pale pink and lit by a myriad of candelabras and hanging chandeliers. In alcoves set into the walls were brilliant white marble statues. In front of the statues were the guests, all dressed as ornately as possible in fine gowns and elaborate suits, with some cravats so large Phoebe wondered how they could breathe. She smiled at her own amusing thought until she caught Graham's glare.

"There is your father," Graham said, nodding his head through the crowd. Phoebe stiffened in response, reluctantly turning her gaze to follow her husband's gesture.

Across the room, she could see Gerard Lewis, the Baron of Notley, in deep conversation with other gentlemen. He was drinking hard with two glasses of sparkling white wine in his hands and laughing raucously with the men around him. This did not surprise her. He avoided women as much as possible these days, ever since her mother's death.

He avoids me most of all.

"There is a matter of business I must discuss with him," Graham released her arm. "Perhaps it would be best if you do not join us."

"I agree," she said, despite her reluctance to agree with Graham on any matter, she knew he was right. Her father never liked seeing her, and she'd had enough of arguing for one night with one man. She didn't need a second argument with another.

"Try not to cause a scene or make a nuisance of yourself," Graham said tiredly, turning away from her. "In fact, stand in the corner. Where you won't get in anyone's way."

She closed her eyes at the insult, waiting for him to walk away.

Somedays, she liked to imagine she was made of the same white marble as the statues around her. She liked to think if such a thing were possible, that all Graham's jibes and insults would bounce off her, unharmed her.

As she opened her eyes, she walked away from the center of the floor, following his wish as she crossed the room toward the punch table pressed against the wall. She waited patiently and properly for the punch bowl to be free before she eagerly poured herself a glass. She downed the first one before preparing a glass that she sipped much slower.

The entire time she sipped, she rearranged the ribbon around her neck. After Graham's attack that evening, Louisa had stared at her in horror, pointing at the purplish bruises that were appearing on Phoebe's neck. In order to cover it up, they had selected a large ribbon and threaded a silver pendant across it to tie round her neck. She hoped coupled with the soft lighting from the candles, it would make the bruises impossible to see.

"Lady Ridlington, there you are," a familiar voice called to her. "I've been looking out for you every five minutes since we arrived, and I was late myself."

Phoebe turned away from the punch table to see Diana Elkin, the Marchioness of Dodge walking toward her with a glass of punch in her hands too. Phoebe tried to pin the fake smile in place that she always wore for her friend, but it did little use. She could already see Lady Dodge's perceptive blue eyes widening.

"Something has happened, hasn't it?" Lady Dodge reached out for her. Phoebe couldn't help it. She immediately took her friend's hand, clinging to it in need of comfort, even though she couldn't confess the words.

"Not at all," she lied, trying her best to make it convincing. "I am merely enjoying a glass of punch."

"Then why is your hand shaking in mine?" Lady Dodge whispered,

stepping toward her. Phoebe looked down to see her friend was right – her fingers were indeed trembling within Lady Dodge’s grasp. She tried to retract her hand once more, but her friend wouldn’t let her. “Tell me, what has happened?”

“It does not matter,” Phoebe said quickly, glancing away through the crowd. She looked toward the opposite side of the room, through the dancers where Graham and her father were talking together, laughing and enjoying themselves.

She was merely thankful Graham was no longer focusing on her.

“You do know you are one of the most dreadful liars I have ever met,” Lady Dodge said, prompting Phoebe to whip her head back round. Her friend was smiling softly.

“I am?” Phoebe asked, innocently.

“It is a good thing. It is one of the reasons I like you so much, you are pure of heart,” Lady Dodge’s praise made Phoebe hang her head and squeeze her friend’s hand tighter. They hadn’t been friends for very long, just a year since they had both married and ended up living in London, but in that time, Phoebe found herself more and more dependent on their friendship.

She trusted Lady Dodge implicitly. They were like minded, fond of the same things, and had a similar humor. What was more, she loved Lady Dodge’s effervescent personality, always talking, always finding the humor in something. She didn’t think she could love her friend more.

“Tell me the truth now,” Lady Dodge said, using their connection to slowly tow Phoebe further away from the crowd. They hung at the back of the room, near one of the alcoves of marble statues.

“I cannot,” Phoebe said. She released her friend’s hand and instinctively reached up to the ribbon around her throat, hoping to hide the bruises further. It was only as she watched Lady Dodge’s eyes widen further that she realized her mistake.

Lady Dodge glanced around her, clearly checking no one was glancing their way before she lifted a hand to the ribbon at Phoebe's neck and pulled it down, just an inch.

"In the name of..." she trailed off, the curse clearly being far too strong to say in company. "He did this, didn't he?"

Phoebe didn't need to answer. She pulled the ribbon straight another time and lifted her punch glass to her lips, trying to be distracted by it.

"Lady Ridlington, you need to escape him."

"If only it were possible," she spoke with a small smile, allowing her mind to wander to an alternate reality for a moment. In this other life, she was free to do as she pleased, away from the ire of Graham and her father. "If only," she said again, wishing the imagination could be true.

"It is possible," Lady Dodge whispered hurriedly, taking her hand again. "I have heard of many ladies that do such things. They flee their husbands and then file for separation through a lawyer later."

"My husband would never permit such a thing, not for me to leave."

"That is why you do not tell the husband," Lady Dodge said with another smile. Phoebe's lips parted in amazement, realizing the audacity of her friend's suggestion.

"I would be running away?" she asked.

"Why not? Do you not wish to do it?"

She thought long and hard about the words, with her gaze flicking around the room. She looked between many women who hung on their husband's arms, most of them were smiling, infinitely happier than she had ever been standing beside her husband. Then her gaze landed on Graham on the other side of the room, and she

remembered the pressure of his hand on her throat, and the fear of how far he could go to hurt her one day.

“More than anything,” she sighed with the words.

“Then let me help you,” Lady Dodge pulled on her hand, urging Phoebe to look back to her.

“Lady Dodge, be serious,” Phoebe almost laughed. “It is fun to talk of. It is certainly wonderful to imagine it, but in practicality it would only incur my husband’s wrath more. I am quite simply trapped.”

“Then allow me to help you out of the trap,” Lady Dodge took another step toward her with her expression completely serious. “Of course, if one were to do such a thing half-heartedly, it could be a disaster. Yet if it is well planned, if it is truly wanted, then of course you can escape him. You could escape these bruises and never have to suffer at his hand again. Is it truly wanted?”

Phoebe found herself saying the words without much more thought, for she knew the answer instinctively. She wanted to be far away from the bruises, she wanted to be free of fear.

“It is,” she said, feeling the tears that had swelled in her eyes earlier that evening threatening to take her again. She blinked them away, aware that Lady Dodge was squeezing her hand in comfort. “But I do not know what to do to achieve it,” she tried to turn her thoughts to practicalities. “My father would never offer any help, that I know for certain.”

“I am offering you help,” Lady Dodge said, bouncing on her toes with an artful smile now in place. “This evening, you could make an excuse to return home sooner than your husband, complain of a headache, or soreness from your bruises. He could hardly argue with that.” At her words, Phoebe winced, all too aware of the pain in the throat. “Urge that lovely maid of yours to pack you a bag and I shall send my carriage for the two of you. Tonight, you can stay at my house.”

"You would do that?" Phoebe abruptly felt hope swell in her stomach. Her friend was offering her a lifeline, a way out of the incessant misery she was suffering.

"Of course, I would," Lady Dodge said, as though the matter were already decided upon. Phoebe was about to grow excited when a thought occurred to her, dampening that hope.

"Ah, there is just one problem," she bit her lip.

"Which is?"

"The Viscount knows of our friendship," Phoebe whispered. "I do not doubt that when he found I was missing, he would search your house."

"Then we must think of somewhere else to hide you," Lady Dodge said, tapping a finger on her punch glass as she screwed up her nose in thought. "Oh, I have just had an idea. It is quite brilliant! I think you'll be impressed by how clever I am this evening."

Phoebe couldn't help the laughter that fell from her lips, delighted by her friend's mannerisms.

"First, I must speak to another about this," Lady Dodge went to walk away when Phoebe tightened her hand on her friend.

"We cannot speak to anyone else about this," she said quickly. "If this is to work, no one else must know."

"Trust me," Lady Dodge said with a whisper. "Someone else must know. Now, wait here. I will be back very soon." As she hurried off through the crowd of guests, darting her head back and forth, Phoebe nearly followed her instruction. For a minute, she stayed perfectly still, until she noticed her punch glass was empty with just a few scarlet red dregs left in the cup.

Well, that just won't do. She made up her mind quickly and crossed

the room again, hurrying toward the punch table. She poured herself another cup and was about to turn away from the table when she bumped into something. No, not something. *Someone!*

The punch went everywhere, all over not only her dress, but the clothes of the person beside her too. Phoebe gasped and looked up with fear when she found a pair of blue eyes staring down at her, rather like Lady Dodge's eyes, only more startling and set within a handsome face.

The jawline was strong and the features rather narrow, though a smile played upon those lips. The black hair over his forehead curled softly, tantalizingly so. The suit was a fine one too, as black as his hair with a midnight blue waistcoat, a few shades darker than the color of his eyes.

Who is that?

Chapter 3

“Oh my! I am so sorry. I cannot apologize enough,” the young woman before Francis was apologizing profusely as she stepped away and hurried to grab napkins off the table beside her.

Francis was startled as a laugh fell from his lips.

“It is only a little punch, I am sure it will dry,” he sought to comfort her, but he could see rather quickly his attempt did little. The punch was already trickling not only over his arm but down his trouser leg too. She started trying to pat the napkins on his arm, drying the punch, then she realized what she was doing, and her eyes widened as she stepped back.

“I’m so sorry,” she said again.

“You said that already,” he was still chuckling. “Pray, think nothing of it.”

“How can I not?” she asked as she tried to dry the marks from her own dress. “I have ruined your suit.”

“Well, you can blame me for that,” he said, before leaning toward her and dropping his voice to a whisper, conspiratorially. “I should not have been so eager to get to the punch bowl. Believe me, the accident was much more my fault than yours.” As he stood straight, he could see her worried expression breaking briefly into a smile, before the concern was back.

The brief smile had lit up her features, making Francis concentrate more on the woman. She was very pretty indeed with rather beautiful green eyes, a small and slender nose, full lips and now cheeks that were reddening from embarrassment. Judging by that blush and the way she hung her head, trying to avoid his gaze, he

thought her rather shy.

"I was the one who collided with you," she said, trying to look up at him again. "I am definitely the one to blame."

"How about we make a deal and say we are both to blame?" he said, patting dry some of the wetness with one of the napkins. "For which you have already apologized for your part, so no more apologies for it. I should be asking forgiveness of you for ruining your dress."

She looked down at the gown, her body suddenly freezing. The dress did not particularly suit her, in his opinion. The neckline was very high, and the sleeves were long, as though she were hiding from the world.

"Oh no," she muttered and then gazed through the crowd of guests, as though looking for someone.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, intrigued at her behavior.

"It does not matter," she said quickly. "Forgive me, you must allow me to pay for a new suit."

"Ha! No such thing is required," he was still laughing. Her sheer panic was amusing to him. "Please, let me put your mind at rest." He assured, stepping toward her as he leaned past to prepare a punch glass. He first took the glass out of her hands, aware that as their fingers touched, she jumped. He had felt the same electric shock but thought nothing of it. "I do not care for the suit or the spilt punch, not a jot."

"You do not?" she asked, seemingly bemused as he filled her glass first before her own.

"Not in the slightest. All I care about is that you no longer feel bad for our accident," he tried to convince her as he passed the glass toward her again. He didn't release the glass just yet, and their dual

hold on the item urged her gaze to lift to his.

She really is rather pretty.

“Can I ask the name of the young lady whose dress I have ruined?” he asked, mocking himself with his tone. He was delighted when her face spread into a small smile again.

“Lady Ridlington,” she explained. His eyebrows quirked, having remembered the name being mentioned by his sister on the journey to the assembly in carriage.

“Viscount Ridlington’s wife?” he asked.

“That is correct,” she said, though her smile vanished from her face at the mention of the husband.

That is one of the reasons I shall never marry, he assured himself. He had no wish to ever have a lady bound to him who would then look so perturbed by the mere mention of his name.

“Francis, there you are,” Diana’s voice disturbed the two of them. Francis saw Lady Ridlington turn her head away, though he felt he could not. He was too busy looking at the pretty features of Lady Ridlington as he sipped his punch. “Ah, I see you have already met my friend. Well, this certainly makes this conversation a lot easier.”

“Met and introduced are two different things,” he said good naturedly, turning to see his sister smiling at the side of him. “We have met, and I know her name, but she does not yet know mine.”

“Ah, Lady Ridlington, allow me to introduce my brother,” Diana said, moving to her friend’s side. “This is the Duke of Hayward.”

The small smile that had been playing on Lady Ridlington’s features vanished and she covered her mouth in shock, her eyes darting back down to the punch stains now on his jacket and trousers.



* * *

I do not believe it, Phoebe thought to herself. I have destroyed the suit of the Duke of Hayward!

To her amazement, the Duke merely laughed again, watching her.

“Lady Ridlington, you look as though you have just been introduced to a wizard, or something equally wondrous. I assure you, I am just a man.” He was charming. Phoebe felt somersaults in her stomach as she hurried to do a curtsy. “Please, you do not have to curtsy so deeply.”

“My friend is very proper, Francis,” Lady Dodge said with a clear warning tone.

“Oh my,” Phoebe stood straight. “Your Grace, you really must let me make amends for the suit now.”

“I will have none of it,” he said clearly, still with that smile that hung about his lips.

“What happened to the two of you?” Lady Dodge said, pointing between the stains on the clothes and noticing it for the first time.

“I bumped into –”

“It was my fault entirely,” Hayward said, clearing his throat to speak over Phoebe. “In my eagerness to have a drink, we collided, and Lady Ridlington lost her punch. On the bright side,” he made an appearance of sniffing his spoilt sleeve. “My suit smells better now. Rather like clementine.”

Phoebe nearly laughed. It was a long time since she had laughed

freely, but the temptation had been there to do so. Instead, she clamped her lips together, feeling the smile take over.

“Well, now that is sorted, Francis, I must speak with you at once,” Lady Dodge said, taking his arm.

“What for? This suddenly sounds urgent,” he said, looking down at his sister with evident suspicion.

For the first time, Phoebe noticed his height. He was of average height, not dissimilar to her husband’s, though perhaps he was a little taller and more athletic in build. In contrast, she didn’t feel frightened at his height when standing next to Hayward, unlike when she stood beside Graham.

“It is urgent,” Lady Dodge said pointedly. “It concerns my friend here and is of the utmost importance.”

Phoebe realized Lady Dodge intended to tell her brother of their escape plan.

“No,” Phoebe said hurriedly, prompting the siblings to flick their heads back toward her. “I mean, Lady Dodge, now is surely not the time.”

“It is the time,” Lady Dodge said quickly. “Remember what I said about trusting me.”

Phoebe tried to hide her sigh as she fussed with the ruined gown another time. She glanced through the crowd, nervous of seeing her husband looking her way. If he had seen that she had ruined her gown, or even worse, how she had ruined the suit of a duke, he would not let her forget it.

“Your friend is upset, Diana,” Hayward’s solemn voice made Phoebe turn back to look at him. He was staring at her, his blue eyes unblinking. Abruptly she realized why his eyes had reminded her of Lady Dodge’s, they were similar indeed. “Now is not the time for

conversation.”

“Believe me, you have no idea how much it is the right time,” Lady Dodge said, offering a knowing smile to Phoebe.

“I will talk with you on whatever this urgent matter is, of course, I will,” Hayward said, nodding at his sister, “but first there is another matter I must attend to.”

“What is that?” Lady Dodge asked.

“Putting a smile back on your friend’s face,” Hayward turned to Phoebe. She was so stunned by the words that she said nothing at first, she merely let her jaw drop in amazement. “Not quite the expression I’m hoping for, but we’ll get there.” She closed her lips, emitting a small smile. “Getting closer.”

He placed his punch glass down on the table before taking the glass out of Phoebe’s hand and placing that down too.

“Now, will you share the next dance with me, Lady Ridlington?” he asked.

“I am sorry?” she asked, uncertain she had heard him right.

“The next dance?” he asked again, gesturing to the floor. “I am far from the finest dancer in this world, but I have made a few ladies in the past smile in such a way. I would be glad to make you smile so now.”

“Your Grace,” Phoebe hurried to excuse herself as she gestured down at their clothes. “I am sure you do not wish to dance with me in this way. I would make quite the spectacle.”

“Nonsense,” he said with a laugh. “We’ll make quite the pairing, both covered in punch.” He offered his hand to her. Phoebe was struggling to think of any other reason to say no when she felt Lady Dodge’s elbow in her arm, urging her forward.

She took Hayward's hand, startled by the warmth in his palm that was so much larger than hers before he led her through the people. Phoebe kept glancing up at his countenance, thinking not only on the man's handsomeness, but his ease of manner and humor.

I have not met a man like this before. She was too busy with this thought that it was only as they reached the floor and took up their positions that she realized what a mistake she had likely made.

It was not improper for a married lady to dance with a gentleman, as long as it was no more than one gentleman, but her husband was likely to see a dance she had with anyone as something improper. He would probably accuse her of humiliating him once more.

As she took up her place opposite Hayward, waiting for the music to begin, she kept glancing around the floor, but she could not see Graham or her father anywhere. She reasoned they may have gone to the smoking room, and she prayed that they had, then her transgression would never be witnessed.

As the violins struck up, she hurried to curtsy and Hayward bowed too. Following the introduction of the music, Phoebe heard the notes to signify the dance was a cotillion and remembered the steps she hadn't needed to dance since her days debuting in the ton.

For a minute, she and Hayward were both silent as they danced. He took her hand as they circled one another, staring at each other before he released her hand then took the other, circling the other way. Phoebe realized how modest Hayward had been in commendation of himself. He was indeed a fine dancer. Though he was light on his feet and clearly skilled, he still looked like a gentleman when he danced. More than once had Phoebe seen a few men dancing with the same elegance that women aspired for, prompting her to laugh. Hayward was different.

With his dancing, she didn't want to laugh, she merely wanted to praise his skill.

"You have done yourself an injustice, Your Grace," she said timidly

as the steps of the dance altered. They held hands and stood side by side, completing a pas de bourrée alongside another couple.

“What injustice?” he asked, looking at her.

“You are a fine dancer indeed.” At her compliment, he laughed warmly.

“How funny you should say such a thing,” he said, before turning the two of them so that they walked around each other, with not a touch between them, only their gazes connected. “I was just thinking on what a fine dancer you are and wondering why you were not on the dancefloor sooner.”

“I...erm...” she faltered, trying to come up with a reason. She could hardly tell the charming man before her that she didn’t dance because of fear of her husband’s thoughts on the matter. “I rarely dance,” she said in the end.

“Then that is a great shame for this assembly,” he said quietly to her, moving them to stand opposite one another again. “I am sure many gentlemen would have enjoyed sharing a dance with you.” The charm was sweet indeed and she found herself smiling. “There we are,” he said, just as two dancers passed between the middle of them.

“There’s what?” she asked, looking up to him again.

“That smile,” he said, pointing at her before taking her hand returning to the beginning of the dance, circling each other hand in hand. “We have it at last.”

She smiled again, startled by how easy he made the effort. Whenever Graham told her to smile it was an order, and it always ended up being fake. There was nothing remotely false about this smile, as this one had been encouraged from her, not ordered.

“I do not think I have seen you at these events before,” she said,

trying to change the topic a little.

“That is because in truth, I like to avoid them,” he whispered to her as they circled back the other way, as though telling her a great secret.

“Why?” she asked, curious to know.

“For I prefer a life that is rather different to this,” he admitted with a sigh. “I do not know what my sister has told you about me.”

“Very little, in truth,” Phoebe confessed, to which he nodded.

“Well, I prefer to travel,” he said with a smile playing on his lips. She could see instantly how happy such a life made him.

“Where have you been?” she asked, desirous to know more.

“The continent mostly, though I am planning a trip to Egypt soon.”

“Egypt? How thrilling!” Phoebe could feel her heart racing faster at the mere idea. The rest of their dance was spent with her asking questions about Egypt whilst Hayward happily spoke of it. As they came to the end of the dance, bowing and curtsying to one another, Hayward looked up, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

“What a good idea that was,” he declared. “I was hoping for a smile, but that one is even greater than I had dared to hope for,” he pointed at her face before offering his hand to escort her from the floor.

She giggled under her breath as she let him lead her away. One glance around the room showed her husband was still nowhere to be seen. She was thrilled by it, it meant she had escaped the fear for a few minutes to indulge in a little happiness.

“Now, I really must speak with you,” Lady Dodge appeared in front of them, not long after they had left the dancefloor. Hayward

dropped Phoebe's hand and she missed the warmth the moment it was gone.

"What is this about?" he asked, with evident worry.

"It is about helping Lady Ridlington leave her husband."

Phoebe looked to Hayward, waiting to see his response.

Chapter 4

“What did you just say?” Francis couldn’t believe his ears. He half thought he was imagining what his sister had said, all because of the punch.

“I need your help. To aid Lady Ridlington in leaving her –”

“Shh!” he said instantly, realizing that he had heard Diana perfectly correctly. He took Diana’s arm, leading her away from the hustle and bustle of the other guests. Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of Lady Ridlington following the two of them. He only released Diana when they were at the far side of the room, separated from the other guests by a table filled with food. “You cannot say things like that in a place like this. What if someone overhears you?”

“Oh, tush, no one is interested. They’re all much more interested in their own business,” she waved a hand at him in dismissal and turned her focus to Lady Ridlington, looping her arm with hers. Francis could see Lady Ridlington’s expression all too clearly. She was blushing even more than before and hanging her head a little, the timidity was evident.

“Forgive me for this, but Lady Ridlington,” he turned his focus to her, trying to sort out the sudden whirring of his mind, “if you wish to leave your husband, that is a matter you must discuss with him. You should not be involving my sister.” He almost regretted the words as soon as they said them, for her gentle features looked shocked as she hung her head even further.

“Calm down, you fool,” Diana said quickly, prodding him in the arm. “I offered to help her. Lady Ridlington is far too kind to ever have the presumption to ask anyone to help her out of this situation, which is why I am asking you on her behalf, before she can stop me.”

"I'd still like to stop you," Lady Ridlington said, looking up. "Perhaps this is not a good idea at all."

"Can you honestly say you wish to go home to your husband tonight?" Diana's words must have hit home for Francis watched as Lady Ridlington lifted a hand to her throat and began to rearrange the ribbon around her neck, upon which was a pendant.

Why is she fiddling so? He wondered, though he did not have long to ponder an answer before his sister was speaking again.

"Francis, I ask you for your help out of necessity," Diana said pleadingly. "It is imperative we move Lady Ridlington away from her husband. I have already arranged with my husband to send our carriage for her tonight."

"And Josiah has no objection to this?" Francis asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"None," Diana said pointedly. Something about this didn't sit right with Francis. He glanced around them and pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration, worried any minute they could be overheard. If Josiah was preparing to take the risk on this woman by helping her escape her husband, who was a Viscount, then things had to be wrong. Josiah didn't get involved very easily; he was too clever for that.

"This makes little sense," Francis lowered his hand. "Why do you need my help if you already have things arranged?" He could see Diana and Lady Ridlington exchange glances before he received an answer.

"We need somewhere for Lady Ridlington to hide," Diana explained. "Her husband would no doubt search my house."

Francis' eyebrows shot up as he realized just what his sister was insinuating. After all, he was back in London, with a large estate on the edge of the city, mostly empty.

"You wish me to hide her?" he asked, his whisper was harried and mad as he stepped toward the two of them. To his amazement, Lady Ridlington backed away, as though going to hide behind her friend.

What was that for? He watched her closely, wondering why she had done such a thing.

"For a short while, yes please," Diana nodded eagerly with her words. "Just until we can apply to a solicitor to obtain a separation for her."

"No, I will not do it," Francis' response was instinctive.

"Why not?" Diana asked, her smile leaving her face in an instant.

"Because it is not my responsibility to get involved in the business of others. Neither should it be yours," he said, gesturing to his sister.

"I cannot leave my friend to a life of misery and despair, no matter how easily you can make that decision," Diana's tartness hurt indeed. He stood perfectly still, looking between the two of them.

"That is not what I am doing. It is just not my place to get involved," he said, before turning his eyes on Lady Ridlington. He didn't need to search her face very hard to see the sadness there, it was plain to see in the way that she bit her lip. "My apologies, Lady Ridlington, but I know you no more than I do a person I pass in the street. I cannot take you away from your husband and hide you. The scandal would be shocking indeed."

"I perfectly understand," she said quickly, looking away from him. "If you would excuse me." She retracted her arm from Diana's, curtsied to them both and then hurried off, walking away and pushing between the people in the crowd. Where she went, he couldn't see, for Diana had tapped him round the arm.

"Ow!" he said, pretending it had hurt more than it actually did,

trying to draw some humor to the moment, but he could see on Diana's face he had failed entirely. "Do not be angry at me, Diana. It would just not be proper."

"And you think it proper to leave Lady Ridlington to that man, do you?"

"That man? I do not know the man! How can I make a judgement on him?" he asked, shaking his head.

"What's going on?" Josiah's voice disturbed the two of them. Francis turned his head to see Diana's husband walking toward the two of them with two glasses of wine in his hand. He passed one glass into his wife's hand before clocking the dismay on her face. "Something bad has happened."

"My dear brother," she said sarcastically, "has refused to offer his help to Lady Ridlington."

"Well, I cannot say I am surprised," Josiah looked over Diana's shoulder at Francis.

"What does that mean?" Francis asked, finding his spine stiffen.

"I mean no slight by it," Josiah was quick to assure him, coming to stand beside him. "You do not know the lady, therefore, why would you take the risk in helping her?"

"My sister asks too much," Francis said quietly. "The Lady seems nice enough, but fleeing her husband? Think of the scandal and the gossip. What kind of gentleman would I be if I hid another man's wife from him? Most of all, I cannot live with a married woman under my roof. That would also be a scandal."

"Then your staff could use a fake name for her," Diana said with sudden hope. "No one need know who she really is."

"Stop trying to make me do it," Francis said warningly, just as

Diana huffed again.

“Very well, I will have to think of something else then,” she said, taking a step away.

“Where are you going?” Francis called after her.

“To find my friend, before her husband does,” Diana called back. As Francis turned his head to Josiah, he could see the glare.

“You rarely glare at me so. That suggests I have done something wrong, though for the life of me I cannot see an error in what I have just done,” he said quickly just as Josiah took his arm. “Ah, when did you get so strong?” He winced at the vice-like grip.

“Practicing fencing,” Josiah said offhandedly as he steered Francis out of the room. “That reminds me, we need another re-match now that you are back from the continent. I will win next time.”

“Judging by your increased strength, I think I will pass,” Francis grimaced just as his friend released him in the corridor outside the Argyll Rooms. “Why are we out here?”

“So that we may speak freely, without fear of being overheard,” Josiah explained, leaning on a wall nearby with folded arms.

“Don’t you judge me for this, Josiah,” Francis said, looking away from his friend.

“I’m not judging you. Were I you right now, I would have made the same decision.”

“Good.”

“But that is merely because you do not know what I know,” Josiah’s words prompted Francis to spin back around and stare at his friend.

“What do you know?” he asked.

“Diana met Lady Ridlington last year. The friendship was instant and since then they have become very dear to each other.” As Josiah began, Francis went to interrupt but his friend held up a finger, urging to let him finish. “In the last year, I cannot tell you how many times Lady Ridlington has turned up at our house, trying her best to hide her tears.”

“Her husband makes her cry?” Francis asked.

“He does worse than that,” Josiah said, glancing up and down the corridor to ensure it was empty before taking a step away from the wall to whisper even more quietly to Francis. “I have seen her wearing scarves and long shawls to hide bruises. I even saw her once fussing with a long sleeve of her dress to hide something on her arm. She thought I hadn’t seen, but I did. It was a long cut.”

Francis paused and cast his gaze downward. A man who beat a woman, in his mind, deserved hell itself. There was no forgivable reason for it – it was nothing but cruel, spawned by a man who desired control, that was all.

“He beats her,” he summarized, just as Josiah nodded.

“He does,” he agreed. “I once saw them at an event where he twisted Lady Ridlington’s arm behind her back. He thought they were alone, fortunately I had taken a turn about the garden and caught them. I dread to think what he would have done had I not stumbled across them, forcing him to stop. Quite frankly, Francis, if I could offer her a safe house for good, I would not be hesitating in doing so. Yet their worries are well founded. If I were to hide Lady Ridlington in my house beyond tonight, her husband would merely send a search party to my home and find her.”

Francis was breathing deeply as he looked back through the doorway into the assembly rooms they had just left. He was thinking of the short and delicate woman he had just danced with, the shyness and the blushing of her cheeks.

How could any man harm such a woman? It made no sense to him,

and actually made him feel rather sick.

“I cannot tell you what to do, my friend,” Josiah said, moving to his side and also peering back into the rooms. “I would never presume to do so, regardless, but I can give you some advice. You can take a risk where I am not able to. To be frank, I would jump through hoops to see that woman safe. What will you do?”

Francis snapped his gaze back to his friend, but it was clear Josiah wasn’t expecting an answer, not yet at least. He clapped Francis on the shoulder before walking back into the assembly.

For some minutes, Francis stood alone, ruffling his hair and thinking hard on what he had been told. He hadn’t made up his mind yet, but he was wavering. The conviction with which he had turned down the request for sanctuary had dissipated completely.

“I have to see her,” he muttered to himself as he walked into the assembly, with his head darting back and forth as he searched for Lady Ridlington. When he found her, she was once again in the corner of the room, apparently having a disliking for being in the middle. She was alone though, staring down at a punch glass in her hands.

He crossed toward her, and when he reached her side, he appeared to make her jump so much that the punch nearly sloshed out of the rim of her glass for a second time that evening.

“Your Grace,” she spoke with surprise and hurried to curtsy.

“There is something I need to know,” he said softly, not bothering with the propriety when his mind was just on one thing. *The beatings.*

“What is that?” she asked, frowning and clearly not understand what he meant.

“Does he hurt you?” he asked the words plainly. He didn’t know

whether he expected her to answer honestly, but her reaction told him everything.

Her lips parted and she tried to walk away, directly past him. He caught her free wrist as gently as he could, urging her to turn her head back to him. Her need to escape and not even answer the question was all the confirmation he needed.

Then his eyes rested on the dress she was wearing, with the high neckline and the long sleeves. All of it was far too much covering for this hot evening.

She is still hiding the bruises. He realized with disgust, then his eyes slipped to the ribbon around her throat. She pulled her hand away from his and rearranged that ribbon. In her attempt to reset it, she had actually revealed the secret she clearly didn't want him to know. He could see a hint of a bruise for just a moment.

That sickening feeling was back, so strong that he was almost nauseous. He knew now how right Josiah was, her husband must have grabbed her around the throat.

"If you would excuse me, Your Grace," she hurried to curtsy again, with her eyes turned away. "I...I should find my friend –"

"I'll do it," the words came surprisingly strongly from him. She paused and slowly turned back toward him with her green eyes wide.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, apparently doubting the proof of her own ears.

"I'll do it," he said again. "I'll offer you a place to hide, and Lord, I pray this decision does not come back to harm us both."

Chapter 5

Phoebe waited until her husband reappeared from the smoking room, just as Lady Dodge had advised, before she approached him. She planned to feign a headache to create a reason to be sent home early. The nearer she got to Graham across the room, she found herself glancing back over her shoulder, toward where she had left Lady Dodge with her husband and her brother, Hayward.

Even at this distance, Phoebe could see the lines of Hayward's face in detail, that expression so readable. Despite his assurance to help her, the nerves were there, coupled with his determination. She wasn't sure what had made him change his mind to help her, she decided she would ask that another time, when she was far away from her husband. Now, she had to focus on escaping Graham.

She faced forward once more and crossed the room toward Graham, only he wasn't alone, beside him was her father.

"Ah, Phoebe," her father said, turning to her without really looking at her face. It was what he had always done, even when she was little. She could remember Christmases where the housekeeper would bring her to see him and he would pat her on the head without looking at her face before dismissing her.

"How are you, Father?" she asked, curtsying to him. Baron Gerard Lewis of Notley was not known for warmth or kindness, something he seemed to show her even more now as he glanced down to her dress and then turned away, in despair.

"I am worse now, what have you done to your gown?" he snapped before flicking his fingers in front of Graham's face. "Lord Ridlington, look at your wife."

Graham's face turned purplish red in anger as he stepped forward,

taking Phoebe's upper arm in his hand. This was bold, even for him in public, as he pinned his fingers around her arm, hurting her again.

"We are in public," she whispered to him, but he didn't seem to care. It reminded her of a thought she'd had earlier that evening.

He's getting worse.

"What kind of exhibition have you made of yourself this evening?" he asked, fuming and hissing with that fury. "You cannot stay here like this. You'll make a pariah of yourself, and me."

"And me!" her father said, turning away. "I cannot believe you would do this, Phoebe."

"It was an accident," she said feebly, knowing already it was useless as her words fell on deaf ears.

"You must go home, now," Graham said. Phoebe turned her gaze toward him realizing how easy her task had been made.

"Really?" she asked as he took her arm and began to steer her across the room.

"I cannot have you making a display of yourself like this. Go home, now. Send the carriage back for me later." As he steered her toward the exit of the room, she managed just once to glance across the guests' heads, seeing Lady Dodge and the Duke of Hayward staring after her. From the way Hayward's gaze had narrowed, she rather expected he could see the way in which Graham was holding onto her so tightly.

Once they were in the entrance hall, Graham made arrangements with a servant to have the carriage called round at once, then he sent one last glare her way before he returned into the ball. As he parted, a flicker of a smile appeared in Phoebe's cheeks.

Could it really be this simple to leave him?

She almost didn't dare to hope. She had always pictured that if she tried to live him, there would be pain involved and anger.

As the carriage came round, she hurried quickly inside and headed straight home. The entire way she was stuck between two emotions, part of her feared what could happen if Graham came home too early, another part of her was beginning to hold onto that hope. Maybe she really could escape Graham at last.

As she reached the house, she ran through the dark entrance hall and up the stairs, happily scrambling to take them two at a time. She didn't bother keeping her posture straight, nor did she care when she stumbled and caught the banister. Graham would have no doubt been horrified at the lack of propriety, but soon that wouldn't be her concern anymore!

When she reached her chamber, she burst in to find Louisa at the opposite side of the room, startled awake from her nap and nearly falling out of her chair in surprise.

"My Lady, is something wrong?" Louisa asked, jumping to her feet. "You're back so soon!"

"Believe me, Louisa, if everything goes according to plan then the biggest wrong of our lives could be gone for good," Phoebe said hurriedly as she closed the door behind her and rushed across the room, lowering her voice to a whisper. "You remember my friend, Lady Dodge?"

"I do, she's a lovely lady," Louisa confirmed with a nod as Phoebe took her hands.

"Lady Dodge has formed a plan tonight to get us out this house for good, so that I may file for separation from Graham!"

"Could it be possible?" Louisa asked, raising her free hand to cover

her mouth.

“It is,” Phoebe nodded eagerly. “They have found a place to hide us.”

“I can scarcely believe it,” Louisa said as her breath hitched, then tears appeared in her eyes.

“Oh, Louisa!” Phoebe threw her arms around her maid, holding her dear. “I pray these are tears of happiness.”

“Of such happiness I cannot tell you,” Louisa laughed through her tears. “After how you helped me, my Lady, I have prayed for a long time I could someday be in a position to help you, but no such day has come. Thank our Lord! I now see He has seen fit to deliver the help you need.” She stepped back, squeezing Phoebe’s hand again.

Phoebe felt the same tears Louisa was suffering swell in her own eyes, mirroring the moment. She knew well what had happened to Louisa all those years ago and was only thankful that she could help when she could. It pained her to know that after the suffering Louisa had already been through, she had to stay in a house with a man like Graham. Now Phoebe was getting them both out of here.

“Perhaps our Lord is a kinder soul than I thought him before,” Phoebe confessed as she pressed the back of one wrist to her eyes to try and stop the tears. “Louisa, we do not have long. Any minute Lady Dodge will arrive in her carriage for us, and we must leave.”

Louisa nodded and abated her tears before standing a little straight, her expression altering as though a sudden thought had occurred.

“But...if we walk out the front door, Lord Ridlington’s loyal staff will see us,” Louisa said slowly.

“I...erm...” Phoebe hadn’t gotten that far.

They’d tell him in a heartbeat! Maybe even send a message for him right

away at the ball.

“Lady Dodge’s carriage is to wait at the end of the road for us, so at least they won’t see that,” she said, thinking aloud.

“Then, I have a plan.” Louisa released her hand and hurried toward the cupboard nearby, flinging open the doors and beginning to pull out gowns. “Let us pack lightly. With just a few bags to take with us, I know of a way we could sneak out of the house.”

“How?” Phoebe asked, hurrying to help her friend pack as she stuffed gowns and shoes in a small portmanteau.

“The cook here owes me a favor,” Louisa said with a twinkle in her eyes. “She keeps a keen eye on the kitchen door at all times, she does. I am certain I can persuade her to let us out of the kitchen door, without anyone seeing us. Then we can sneak off down the back alley to find Lady Dodge’s carriage.”

“Louisa, you are a genius,” Phoebe happily praised her maid, to which Louisa affect a curtsy with a laugh.

“I aim to please,” she giggled before hurrying back to the clothes. “Now, we must be quick! The sooner we are out of Lord Ridlington’s house and into that carriage, the happier I will be.”

“As will I,” Phoebe said, pausing in her packing and lifting a hand to the ribbon around her neck momentarily. She smiled briefly, thinking of a life where she wouldn’t have to hide bruises or wear odd garments to cover up scratches and grazes.

Soon, she could have a new life, as long as Graham never found out where she was going.



Francis couldn't sit still as the carriage came to a stop at the end of the road, in the exact meeting place Diana had described. They were beside the church tower at the edge of Smithfield Lane within the heart of the city, a short distance away from Lady Ridlington's house.

"You look the least calm of the lot of us," Josiah declared from where he sat beside Francis in the carriage. Francis turned his attention on his friend, trying his best to still his leg that couldn't stop bouncing up and down.

"Can you blame me?" he asked.

"I can blame you for wearing a hole in my carriage floor," Diana pointed out, gesturing down to his leg. "Desist!" Francis made a point of merely moving his leg harder then. "Francis."

"It cannot be helped, Diana," he said with caution. "I am about to hide a viscountess in my house for goodness knows how long, away from not only her husband, but her father who is a baron. You neglected to mention that part."

"I had a feeling it wouldn't help persuade you," Diana said with innocence.

Francis let out a growl of frustration and hung his head forward as he rested his elbows on his knees. Lady Ridlington's connections only made what the punishment could be if their deception was discovered all the worse. He felt Josiah clap his shoulder in comfort.

"Please tell me you are not regretting your decision, Francis," Diana said pleadingly, prompting Francis to look up at her again.

"No," he said, certain of it. Seeing that bruise around Lady Ridlington's neck and the long-sleeved dress had made up his mind.

He would leave no woman to the hands of a beater, least of all one who would march their own wife across an assembly room with their hand clamped firmly around their wife's arm.

Francis's jaw had dropped to watch it. He knew most people at the assembly wouldn't have noticed it, Lord Ridlington had made a point of trying to disguise his action, and other guests were far more concerned with their own merriment. Yet the moment Francis had seen Lady Ridlington marched across the room by her husband, he had looked for the grasp, and he found it. Lord Ridlington was holding so tightly onto his wife that he had crumpled her sleeve and made her wince.

"I wouldn't leave her to a man like that," Francis could hear the determination in his voice make it even deeper and darker than before.

"For someone who is usually so humorous and takes life with a pinch of salt, you can sound scary at times, Francis," Diana pointed out with a giggle.

"Well, that happens when we're talking about a man hurting his wife. As soon as we're far away from here, I will be humorous again, once I can be certain Lord Ridlington will never know that I am the one who is hiding his wife," Francis said, sitting back in the carriage seat again.

"We'll work hard to ensure that doesn't happen," Josiah said with a smile upon his features.

"You're plotting something," Francis said with a smile pointing at his friend.

"I was thinking, to make our plan convincing, Diana and I should offer our help to find Lady Ridlington after she goes missing. By offering him our help, he will have no idea that we conspired against him," Josiah said with a smile.

"Clever man," Francis said with a slow nod.

“Thank you. I’ll play my part. Ready to do yours, Francis?” Josiah asked.

“As much as I can ever be,” he sighed, looking out of the window. He could peer through the graveyard and out to the road on the other side, but in the moonlight, he could see no one. Lady Ridlington and her maid were not there yet.



* * *

“Wait here, my Lady, for just a minute,” Louisa begged.

Phoebe did as she asked just as Louisa hurried off down the servants’ staircase. Phoebe waited at the very top of the thin spindly staircase in the house with her portmanteau under her arm as she stared down the steps. Elsewhere in the house, she could hear a few servants’ moving around, preparing for their master’s return where he would take up his usual place drinking port in his study. Phoebe knew they had to be gone soon, before Graham could return and find her making an escape.

A minute or so later, Louisa’s face appeared at the bottom of the staircase, urging Phoebe to follow. She lifted the small portmanteau carefully and hurried down, being careful not to make a sound on the steps. When she reached the bottom, Louisa’s smile told her that their plan was working.

“This way,” Louisa urged her to follow. They pushed through a wooden door, into a room banked with worktops on one side and herbs that were hanging from the ceiling and drying on the other. In the center of the room was the cook, currently fanning her face with the bottom panel of her apron.

“If I am discovered for this...” the cook trailed off, shaking her

head.

“No one need ever know,” Phoebe said quickly, “but I am eternally grateful for the kindness.” The cook smiled briefly at her.

“I’ll take comfort in you being away from here, my Lady. No one in this world deserves pain like my master has delivered on you. Least of all someone as kind as you.” The cook’s words touched her greatly. Phoebe dropped a quick kiss to the cook’s cheeks, urging another smile to fall from her, before Phoebe followed Louisa toward the door. “Do you know your way?” the cook asked, following them to the door.

“Through the alley and the back of the graveyard,” Louisa said as she hitched her own bag further up her shoulder, to which the cook confirmed with a firm nod.

“God speed!”

Phoebe and Louisa exchanged a smile before they hurried outside. It was a warm night as it was the height of summer, meaning there wasn’t a breadth of breeze or a chill in the air. As the door closed behind them, Phoebe looked back to the rear of the house just once.

“Goodbye, house,” she murmured.

“Not goodbye home, my Lady?” Louisa asked.

“No, it never felt like home,” Phoebe said, holding the portmanteau higher. “Let us be gone.”

Together, she and Louisa hurried through the alleyway that backed onto the graveyard, as they had discussed. Part way through the graveyard, she saw a carriage waiting at the far end of the street, under the steeple church tower.

“They’re here,” Phoebe said excitedly, rushing toward it. She didn’t even have time to knock before the door of the carriage opened and

she was greeted with the face of the Duke of Hayward staring back at her.

Chapter 6

“You came,” Lady Ridlington said, gazing up at Francis. In the moonlight, he was astonished by how the light emphasized her pretty features, making them even more noticeable than they had been at the assembly. Her full lips were parted in amazement and her green eyes were almost silver in this light.

“Of course, we did!” Diana said quickly before Francis could gather himself to say any words at all. “Did you have any problems?”

“None,” Lady Ridlington said as Francis jumped down from the carriage.

“Let me take that,” he said, taking the portmanteau out of her hands. As they touched, he felt that same jolt he’d succumbed to earlier that evening. He rather thought she also felt it, from the way she retracted her hand and turned her head away from him.

“We have my maid to thank for the lack of problems,” Lady Ridlington said, taking her maid’s arm as Francis moved round the carriage to hand the portmanteau and the maid’s bag to the footman who duly attached them to the back of the coach. “Louisa helped sneak us out of the kitchen.”

“I’ve said it before, Louisa, you are a prized maid. If only I had found you myself first,” Diana said with a laugh.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we do not have time to chat now,” Francis said, moving back to the carriage and offering Lady Ridlington his hand. “Time to get you away from here, my Lady.”

He did not miss the way her lips quirked into a smile as she took his hand. He tried to ignore the jolt it made in his chest as he helped her up into the carriage. He next went to help up the maid, Louisa,

who appeared very startled indeed, her brown eyes going wide.

“Do not many men offer to help you into a carriage?” he asked.

“No Dukes, that’s for certain,” Louisa said but took his hand anyway to climb in. He smiled and followed her in, eagerly sitting down beside Josiah and striking the door to show the driver they were ready.

As the carriage set off, Francis turned his eyes to Lady Ridlington, finding her sat between Diana and Louisa, with each of her hands tightly clasped in one of theirs. The tight grasp showed the deep friendship Lady Ridlington had in both of the women either side of her. It was rather touching to see.

“We have it all planned out, Lady Ridlington,” Diana said, turning excitedly to her. “We shall take you now straight to my brother’s house. He has a rather large townhouse on the edge of London with its estate attached.”

“An estate?” Lady Ridlington repeated, her eyebrows lifting.

“It is not as large as the country seat, but it will do nicely,” Francis said in jest, pulling a smile from her. He rather liked the idea of causing more and more of those smiles.

“The house is quite secluded compared to other houses in London,” Diana went on. “You will be quite safe there.” Francis watched Lady Ridlington closely, seeing the way she took a deep breath, as though daring herself to breathe fully again.

“He will not find me there?” she asked.

“We have thought of a way to cover up the identity of my guest,” Francis said, gesturing toward her. “Diana and I have a cousin, someone who we haven’t seen for many years. She lives up in Northumberland now and shares your hair color.”

"The last time anyone saw her in London, she was just a child," Diana rushed to explain. "By pretending you are her, none of the staff will quibble a house guest, they will think Francis's cousin has come to see him. I highly doubt any servants will see fit to gossip about a mere cousin coming to visit either."

"Gossip?" Francis said, finding it impossible not to try and cause another smile to appear on Lady Ridlington's face. "Such things are banned on my estate."

"Banned?" Lady Ridlington said, looking back to him.

"Punishable," he jested, waiting as not only Lady Ridlington laughed but others too. He only watched her laugh though, no one else. "Your new name will be Lady Isabella Minnett."

"Pretty name," Lady Ridlington said as she turned to Louisa. "This is really happening," she said to her friend who squeezed her hand tighter.

"Soon, my Lady, all will be well," the maid said kindly. Francis rather wondered what it would be like to hold Lady Ridlington's hand in such a way and offer the same comfort. The moment he thought it he realized what he was doing and sat straight in his seat, looking away.

Forming any kind of liking to Lady Ridlington is a foolish idea indeed!

"In the meantime, I will procure a lawyer for you," Josiah spoke up, addressing Lady Ridlington. "I know many in town and some have great reputations of success in such matters. I have no doubt I can secure you one within a week who can start proceedings."

"A week?" Lady Ridlington looked so excited that she moved forward to the edge of her seat, held on the chair merely by her grasp on her friends.

"Correspondence will have to be done by letters to begin with,"

Francis said aloud. "If anyone sees the lawyer attending Lady Ridlington at my estate, that is certain to set tongues wagging."

"Agreed," Josiah nodded.

"I...have a problem," Lady Ridlington said, looking down to her lap momentarily.

"No problem that cannot be surpassed, I am sure," Francis said smoothly, earning her gaze another time. "What is the problem?"

"I only took a little money from the house," she said quietly, so low as if she were afraid to admit as much. "My husband holds onto the money he got from my dowry. I...have nothing. How am I to pay for the lawyer?"

"I'll pay it lieu," Francis declared quickly. Lady Ridlington was not the only one to look surprised. Diana's eyes widened to appear as large as the moon itself, and Josiah snapped his head toward him. "Careful, Josiah, you'll break your neck from moving so quickly."

"You'll pay it?" Josiah asked. "I was going to offer the same."

"You have a wife to pay for now. Fortunately, I do not have that burden," Francis said with a smile, earning a roll of Dian's eyes.

"I am hardly that expensive!" she said with dramaticism, but Francis just moved on.

"When you obtain your income from your separation, my Lady," he turned to Lady Ridlington, "you may pay me back. In the meantime, the expense of a lawyer will not drain on my money."

"You are very kind indeed," she said, smiling up at him. This was a different smile now. It wasn't like the ones where she laughed at his jokes, this was unique, it suggested something deeper that made her happy. He liked this smile even more than the last.

Yet the smile faded a minute later as she turned to Diana who asked more after her escape from the house. Francis was happy to sit back out of the conversation for a while as he used the time to peruse Lady Ridlington. Every now and then, he could just about see the tremble of her hands, betraying her fear, then she would smile and thank them all again for the trouble they were going to.

He could see exactly what Josiah meant about wishing to help the woman. He had known her for a few hours at most and was compelled to go far indeed to help her. He half wondered if he had known Lady Ridlington for a year or more, how far he would go to see her safe and happy.



* * *

When the carriage pulled up on a drive, Phoebe strained to see beyond the windows, but she couldn't see anything except blackness. Clouds had grown across the moon, limiting what light there was.

"We're here," Hayward said, reaching for the door and opening it wide, stepping down quickly.

"After a couple of days, we will come to see you," Lady Dodge said as Phoebe moved toward the exit. "I give you my word."

"You have done so much for me, I do not know how to thank you," Phoebe said, squeezing her friend's hand one last time.

"If you thank us anymore, my Lady, I am certain you will make your throat sore from the effort," Hayward said with a smile, looking back into the carriage. "You have thanked us enough." He offered his hand to her to take. She gladly took it and stepped down, smiling at his jest.

He next helped down Louisa who hurried to help the footman with the portmanteau before they said goodbye to those still in the carriage.

“Josiah, let me know about the lawyer,” Hayward said to Lord Dodge.

“I will,” he nodded. “Now, Lady Ridlington. It’s time to relax. Enjoy yourself for a bit and rest assured the Viscount will not find you here. Hayward may not be the best of company –” he jested and was interrupted by Hayward.

“How rude!” he pretended to be thoroughly offended.

“But you can already see he’s a half decent man,” Lord Dodge said.

“Half decent? Very decent indeed!” Phoebe said quickly. No matter what the outcome of her escape tonight, she knew she would always be indebted to Hayward standing beside her, for he had facilitated her escape. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, my dear, look after yourself now!” Lady Dodge called as the door to the carriage was closed and the horses began to pull it away.

“Time to see your new home for a short time,” Hayward said, pulling up the portmanteau under his arm and beckoning Phoebe and Louisa to follow him toward the house.

“Have you ever seen a duke that carries his own luggage before?” Louisa whispered in Phoebe’s ear, so only she could hear.

“Never,” Phoebe said back, hurrying to follow Hayward up the pebble driveway toward the front of the house. “He is a different gentleman indeed.” The idea rather thrilled her.

She couldn’t see the frontage of the house clearly in the darkness, but as Hayward opened the front door, light from a myriad of

candles spilled out of the space.

It made Phoebe yearn to be inside faster and she hurried up the front step and through the porchway into the house. The moment she was inside she stopped and gazed around, her jaw dropping in amazement.

Where Graham's house was black, dark, full of shadows and was plainly uninviting, this house was the opposite. The walls were painted a bright white and the candles filling the space shone golden light around them. Even the floor was made up of interchanged squares of white and yellow-tinged marble, with not a dark spot in sight.

"Your Grace, back so soon," a kindly voice came from a nearby doorway. Phoebe turned toward it to see a homely housekeeper, plump and ruddy-cheeked hurrying forward. "Oh, my! We have a guest! Two, in fact, but we are not prepared."

"Ah, that was my fault, Mrs Goodman," Hayward said, gesturing back toward Phoebe. "I failed to give notice of my visitors. This is Lady Isabella Minnett, my cousin, and her maid, Louisa."

"Lady Isabella! Oh, my," the housekeeper hurried forward and curtsied deeply. "I have not seen you since you were no taller than my apron strings."

"Mrs Goodman, it's lovely to see you again," Phoebe said, affecting the lie perfectly with a smile. She liked the housekeeper already; she was a happy and kindly person.

"I see you are just as sweet as you were as a child," Mrs Goodman said. "Louisa, you are new to me, but I am so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"As I am yours, Mrs Goodman," Louisa curtsied to the housekeeper.

"Ooh, isn't she proper! I can't remember the last time I was curtsied

to, no need that for that,” she said with a giggle.

“Mrs Goodman, could you show our guests to some rooms, please?” Hayward asked, gesturing up the stairs. “I was thinking of the guest room overlooking the pond for my cousin.”

“Pond?” Phoebe asked, sounding excited, to which Hayward widened his eyes at her behind the housekeeper’s back. “Ah, yes, the pond. I had quite forgotten there was one.”

“Well, you were very young when you were here last, my Lady,” Mrs Goodman said, not even noticing the error. “I’ll run upstairs now. Louisa, if you come with me, I’ll show you a few things you will need. Once everything is set, I will come and get you.”

“Thank you, you are very kind,” Phoebe said as Mrs Goodman and Louisa hurried off up the stairs. Once they were gone, Phoebe turned her attention to Hayward who was standing in the entrance hall with a smile on his face and his arms folded. “What has amused you now?” she asked quietly once she’d heard a door upstairs close on Mrs Goodman and Louisa.

“I was just thinking that lies are not your strong suit,” he said softly.

“You sound just like your sister,” Phoebe said, folding her arms and mirroring his stance. To her delight, he laughed warmly, it lit up his features, in particular those blue eyes that crinkled with delight.

“That I have been told many times in my life,” he confessed. “Whereas I can never see it. When it comes to lies, you will get better at them. You just need more practice.”

“In truth, I do not like lies,” she said, feeling her smile fade a little as the jest left her. “I associate them with cruelty in this world, I suppose.” She was saddened to see Hayward’s smile vanished at these words.

He took a step toward her and dropped his folded arms.

“Lady Ridlington, rest assured, while you are in my house no cruelty will befall you here. It is not just that I despise any man who would ever harm a woman,” his expression emphasized his words as he screwed up his nose. “But I have offered you sanctuary, and I intend to keep to my word.”

“In truth, I do not think I have ever met anyone with this kindness, Your Grace,” she said, watching as his eyebrows shot up across his forehead. “You barely know me. What if you come to regret your decision? What if the Viscount were to discover our plot?” she asked, feeling her heartbeat quicken and echo in her ears at the idea.

“I would still never regret it,” he said decisively. “Now, I will take leave of you,” he said, pointing toward the top of the stairs where Mrs Goodman was appearing again. “Goodnight,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “Lady Ridlington.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she said, curtsying to him as he bowed. As she turned and headed toward the stairs, she glanced back at him more than once, praying that he was right.

I hope neither of us has cause to ever regret this decision.

Chapter 7

When Phoebe woke, she sat bolt upright in bed, flicking her head back and forth about her chamber. She was half expecting her husband to be standing in the doorway, ready to take her home, probably grasping her wrist painfully all the way. Yet he wasn't there, her fears had just been nightmares. Instead, all around her was the opulent chamber Hayward had given her.

The cream walls were made of paneled wood and decorated with landscape paintings of green hills and lakes. The ceiling of the room was lofted high above her head and swirled in white molded plaster. Around her, the furniture was just as cream or white, with the occasional accent of gold dappled throughout, on the bed curtains, on the rug before the mantelpiece fire and on a rococo-style settee placed in front of the window.

Phoebe jumped from the bed, unable to let go of her fear just yet and ran toward the settee. Kneeling on the cushioned seat, she peered out of the window. To the far right, she could just see the long, pebbled driveway, where she thought she might see Graham, marching down the drive to come and collect her, yet he wasn't there.

Her eyes flitted to the view instead, looking over the grand pond that was surrounded by a renaissance style garden, with a fountain in the middle and great luscious borders of flowers.

"I feel I could wake from this dream at any moment," she whispered to herself.

"Oh, I hope not," Louisa's voice disturbed her and made her flick her head round. The maid had just appeared through the door, carrying a fresh bowl of water. "Then I might have to wake up too."

“Can you believe it, Louisa?” Phoebe said, jumping off the seat and rushing toward her. As Louisa placed the bowl down on a sideboard, Phoebe took hold of her maid’s hands and twirled her round in a circle. “I’m just so happy, so relieved that I don’t have to walk down those stairs this morning and be greeted by Graham’s face!”

“Any more of this, my Lady, and you’ll make me ill!” Louisa laughed, bringing the two of them to a stop.

“I’m sorry,” Phoebe said hurriedly with a giggle. “I’m just so excited.”

“Well, having a handsome duke greeting you in the morning might do that to any lady,” Louisa said with a conspiratorial whisper.

Phoebe froze above the bowl of water where she was splashing her face and turned back to Louisa.

“You noticed he was handsome too?” she asked, almost nervous with her words.

“How could I not?” Louisa said, hurrying toward the cupboard to pull out a gown for the day. “I have eyes.”

“True,” Phoebe sighed, looking back down at the bowl of water. “I suppose any woman would have to have a lot of problems with their eyesight not to see it.”

“Now you get to have breakfast with him. Lucky indeed!” Louisa laughed.

“Wait, Louisa,” Phoebe towed off her face, feeling more and more discomforted. “I am indebted to Hayward, but that is it. I am already married, I could never...” she trailed off, waving a hand in the air to emphasize her point.

“I know, my Lady, I’m just having fun with you. Now, which one

would you like to wear? The white or the blue?" Louisa held up two gowns, but Phoebe was distracted as she pointed to the blue one. She was thinking of Hayward's good humor from the night before and his incredible kindness to do what he was doing for her. How was she ever supposed to repay his kindness? "Are you sure, my Lady?" Louisa's question brought her back to the moment. "You like the white one more."

"I do," Phoebe confirmed, crossing the room toward Louisa, "but my bruises are still noticeable. The blue one will cover them up more."

The mention of bruises seemed to take any smile out of the room. In perfect silence, they hurried to dress Phoebe, both lost in their own worlds for a minute. When it came to tying another ribbon around her throat to hide the bruises there, Phoebe paused for a time with the ribbon in her hand and stared at her reflection instead. It was still bright purple and blue, with Graham's fingermarks clear across her skin.

"I only wish there was more I could do for you, my Lady," Louisa's voice made Phoebe snap her gaze away from the bruise, up to her maid.

"More? Louisa, you are my lifeline. Without you this last year, goodness knows what I could be like, probably very miserable indeed," she said, smiling at the maid. "You have kept me sane through all of this."

"I just wish I could repay your kindness to me," Louisa said, helping to tie the ribbon.

"There is no repayment needed, remember that, my friend," Phoebe said softly, remembering how she had first found Louisa, at the hands of a man as violent as Graham was. Phoebe was fortunate that she had been in a position to help Louisa at the time. "For the first time, I have real hope for the both of us."

Phoebe connected their gazes in the reflection in the mirror, smiling

at her maid. "We have a different future ahead of us now, Louisa. One where neither of us will need to fear waking up in the morning."



* * *

Francis was already waiting at the breakfast table, having started his meal some time ago as he was an early riser when Lady Ridlington appeared. His gaze flicked up to her in the doorway where she stood there nervously, ringing her hands together for a minute.

"You are standing in my doorway like a mouse, Lady R-Isabella," he cursed his near slip up, casting a gaze back to the butler who was just placing a fresh pot of tea on the table for him.

Lady Ridlington smiled up at him and took a step into the room.

"Forgive me, I guess I just..." she trailed off, looking nervously around, urging Francis to leave off his meal and give her his full attention. He hadn't considered last night what else could be going on in Lady Ridlington's home beyond the beatings, but the fact that she was approaching the breakfast table as though it were some sort of quandary made him worry.

Was her husband controlling, perhaps of where she sat at the table? Or maybe even of what she ate? He'd heard of such men.

Today, that changes.

"Please, sit wherever you like," he said, standing to his feet and beckoning her further into the room. She offered a small smile and started walking toward the chair that sat at a right angle to him at the table. He duly helped slide out her chair and push it back in

again. "Now, quite frankly my cook has prepared every meal under the sun for you this morning."

"I've never seen such a display," she said, her eyes wide as she looked around the table that was full of dishes.

"Apparently my cook was rather dismayed I did not inform her of my guest in advance. Without knowing what you like, she has taken a guess, and promptly made every breakfast I think I have ever had," Francis said, chuckling as he returned to his chair. He was somewhat relieved when the butler left the room, promising to come back soon with some more milk.

Lady Ridlington's eyes perused the different dishes for a minute.

"Would it be all right if I had a little bit of everything?" she asked him, looking at him expectantly.

"You need not ask me, you know," he said, shaking his head. "You can merely help yourself to anything you want."

"I can?" she asked, looking more startled than when he had said the night before he would help her after all.

"Goodness knows what kind of house your husband was running," he whispered to her, just in case there were any servants standing beyond the door. "Please, eat anything you like."

Her smile grew even greater. Just as the night before, Francis felt that lurch in his stomach at seeing that smile.

That is not a good thing! She is married. Any liking for the lady would be...well, it would be complicated to say the least.

Trying to dispel the power her smiles had over him, he pulled his newspaper toward him on the table and tried to be interested in the latest news stories. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he could see exactly what she helped herself to. She cut tiny slices of plum

cake and pound cake, then there was fresh bread and butter too. There were also new peaches and grapes that she added to her plate, until it was rather full. Seeing her smile as she tucked in, he once more tried to focus on the newspaper.

After a few minutes of silence, Francis began to feel the awkwardness of the room. He barely needed to glance Lady Ridlington's way to see she was feeling a little uncomfortable too, wriggling in her seat. They were two strangers thrust together in an unusual situation; it was hardly surprising they weren't clear on how to talk to each other.

Francis' memory slipped back to the dance the night before and how easy it had been to talk with her then. He wanted that back, and there was no reason he couldn't have it. Just as long as he kept his infatuation with seeing her smile at bay.

"Well, I'm guessing you feel as odd as I do about this situation," Francis decided the best way to tackle the situation was to confront it. Lady Ridlington looked up from her pound cake with her eyes wide.

"You could say that," she said with humor. "It is all a little strange to be here."

"I suppose it is. Is there any way I can make you feel more at ease about it?"

"The pound cake is accomplishing that very well for you. It's delicious!" she said as she dug her fork back in. He laughed warmly at her words. With that, the awkwardness in the room was gone.

"Well, for now we do not know how long you will be here, so I suggest we treat it as a chance for you to enjoy yourself. Completely. With no inhibitions whatsoever," he said with cheer, watching as she sat back in her chair, clearly marveling at the idea.

"I thought you said last night you were off to Egypt soon. I wouldn't wish to outstay my welcome," she said hurriedly, glancing back to

the door to look for any servants that might disturb them.

“Not yet,” he assured her. “And I will not go whilst you are still in need of help, my Lady.” His words came out deeper than he had meant them, but the response was delightful indeed. Her cheeks began to blush warmly, lighting up those pretty features of hers. “So, back to the matter at hand.”

“What matter?” she asked, taking another bite of her cake.

“I will not have you sad here whilst you are my guest. I wish you to be happy, to enjoy yourself! What would you like to do today?” he asked, watching as she reached for the teacup on the table. Her hand shook slightly as she did so, making him frown a little. “I have made you nervous again,” he said, pointing at her hand. She promptly placed her teacup down and hid her hand under the table. “Why did I make you nervous?”

“It’s just...” she paused, clearly thinking through her words. “I don’t very often have a choice in what I do.”

“That is about to change,” he said firmly, gesturing to the table. “For starters, you can stay here and eat as much as you like, but Cook does a fabulous dinner in the evenings, so I warn you not to fill up too much.” His jest made her laugh softly. “As for what you do today, you can do anything at all that you wish to do. Anything! Say the word.”

She paused and looked up to the ceiling, evidently debating her options for a moment. After a minute, she lowered her gaze and picked up her teacup once more.

“Before I married, I used to go riding a lot,” she said softly. “Every day, in fact.”

“Why did you stop?” Francis asked.

“My husband didn’t think it was a suitable hobby for a young lady,”

she said, not lifting her gaze to his.

“That’s absurd!” Francis laughed. He could see his response had surprised her as her gaze darted up to his. “He really said such a thing?” She nodded in answer. “When I was travelling, I went through Spain, where they are known for their impressive horse skills. I saw a travelling circus where their horse riders perform acrobatics on the horses.”

“Truly?” she asked, turning more to him in her chair as her lips parted in wonder. “What was that like?”

“Awe-inspiring,” he chose the word carefully. “Frightening too, I spent most of the time terrified that one of the acrobats would have an accident at any moment, then it was all the more thrilling when they pulled off their trick. My point is, every single one of those acrobats was a lady. I have never seen a gentlemen ride as well as they did. I would quite happily argue with your husband on his opinion of horse riding.”

Lady Ridlington smiled as though she were trying to hold back a laugh.

“I used to ride every day when I was younger,” she went on. “If you have a stable here, I would be grateful to borrow a horse, just to ride around the estate. I promise not to go beyond.”

“Of course, you may,” he said. “I’ll come with you.” He wasn’t sure what had prompted him to make the declaration, but it surprised him as much as it clearly surprised Lady Ridlington who sat straighter in her chair.

Why did I say I would come? Perhaps I wish to torture myself with more of Lady Ridlington’s sweet smiles? This should be interesting.

Chapter 8

Phoebe could barely stand still as she waited outside of the stable. Hayward had gone inside to see the stable boy and had bid her to wait outside.

“Can I not come in with you?” she called to him.

“That would ruin the surprise, I feel,” he called back to her.

“A surprise?” she asked, shifting more and more now where she stood. She had changed into a riding dress, ready for the day, midnight blue with long sleeves. Despite the heat of the day, she welcomed it, for it still masked the extent of the bruises along her arms.

“Now, close your eyes,” Hayward called to her from inside the stable.

“Must I?” she asked, trying her best to see inside the stable, but it was no use. One side was blocked because of stacked hay bales, and the other stable doors were closed.

“Allow me my fun, close your eyes,” Hayward bid her again.

“Very well, they’re closed,” she declared, firmly closing her eyes.

“Promise not to peek?”

“I cannot make that promise,” she said, earning his laughter which was sounding closer and closer. His footsteps came nearer toward her, as did hooves clomping on the cobbled courtyard outside the stable.

“Now,” Hayward’s voice was so close that she jumped. He was

practically whispering in her ear. It sent a thrill up her spine, a thrill she had never felt before. "Outstretch your hand."

She did as he instructed, stretching out her hand, then she felt someone take her wrist.

"This way," he said and moved her hand a little. The touch of his hand on hers reminded her of the dance they had shared the night before. It abruptly sent more thrills through her body, up from where his hand had touched her, along her arm and into her chest. "There we are." He released her hand, and she tried her best not to sigh from disappointment.

Into her hand, she felt a horse prod its nose. Gently, she stroked the animal up and down its nose, earning soft snorts in response.

"Open your eyes," Hayward whispered in her ear, so close that she could feel her neck tingle. She did as he asked and opened her eyes, when the sight that greeted her made her jaw drop.

Before her was a grey horse, one of the tallest she had ever seen, mottled white with long grey hair and bold black eyes. The horse almost didn't look real, but something that belonged in a fantasy world or in an unearthly dream.

"I have never seen a horse like this before," she said, stepping closer toward the steed. The horse was clearly delighted by her petting and pushed his nose even further into her hand. "What is it?"

"I thought you might like it," Hayward said, moving to stand the other side of the steed's head and pat him on his neck. "This is an Andalusian."

"I have heard of them, but I have never seen one before," she murmured in awe of the horse. "It's spectacular."

"I brought him back from my travels. You'd be hard pressed to find a more loyal horse than Cantante here."

“Cantante? What a beautiful name,” Phoebe marveled as she walked down the side of the horse, noting the reins and the saddle were in place. As she reached the horse’s side, Hayward walked round the steed the other way and offered his hand to her, as though to help her into the saddle. “Wait...I could not ride this horse.”

“Why not?” he asked, frowning a little.

“It’s an Andalusian!” she gestured toward the horse, as though it would explain everything.

“As I said, I wish you to enjoy your day,” he said and waved his hand in the air for her to take again. “What could be more fun than riding an Andalusian?” He merely waved his hand once more when still she stood back nervously. “Well, my hand will grow tired if we continue like this for much longer,” he jested, pulling another smile from her.

She finally took his hand, this time basking in the warmth of it for a touch longer as he helped her up into the saddle. She sat side saddle, with her right leg looped around the pommel at the front.

“It’s very tall indeed,” she said, gasping as she looked down at the ground below. She feared she might be a little rusty. There were days as a child where riding was her only freedom, where she would escape her father’s house and ride for miles, jumping fallen trees and fences, but that was some time ago.

“Well, I promise if you fall that I shall pick you up,” he said with a smile as a second horse was pulled out of the stable. Phoebe tried to hide the blush his words caused across her cheeks. Hayward pulled himself up into the saddle of a brown steed beside her, whose hair had been braided tightly. “Ready?” he asked, gesturing for her to lead the way.

The excitement coiled in her stomach as she pulled on the reins and urged the Andalusian to gallop.



* * *

Francis had never seen a rider quite like Lady Ridlington. Of course, he'd seen the impressive acrobats in Spain, but this was different. Lady Ridlington may have been nervous at first of the tall Andalusian, but after a while, she relaxed and was extremely impressive to watch. She could urge the horse to a greater speed than he ever could, and Cantante only appeared to love her more for it. She was also a fine jumper, able to take fallen tree logs with ease around the woods in the estate.

"You will have to slow down, or I will never catch up!" he called to her as he chased her through the woods.

She dutifully did as he asked, pulling on the horse's reins and coming to a stop in a small clearing in the estate. From this part of the grounds, they had a grand view back down the hill to the front of the house, and the townhouses beyond on the edge of London.

"Forgive me," she said, turning to him with a smile. "I have just forgotten how free I can feel when riding." She turned her head up to the clouds, as though basking in that freedom. With her eyes turned away, it gave Francis a minute or two to observe her without fear of being discovered.

She was windswept now, with her brown hair falling out of its chignon as it was bristled around her cheeks by the wind. Her cheeks were pinker than usual from the exercise, and those green eyes of hers were alight with much more life than he had seen in them the night before.

This is where she belongs. Riding!

He added the last word in his mind, realizing he could have meant

here...on his estate. He tried to persuade himself that's not what he meant at all, he just meant she belonged in a world where she could ride.

"Well, I warrant you are the superior rider," Francis said, earning her gaze again.

"Oh no, surely not," she said. "It is simply that my horse is carrying the lighter load."

"Are you saying I carry too much weight, my Lady?" He pretended to be offended.

"No, I didn't mean –"

"Oh, the insult!" he continued the jest. His mocking tone brought laughter from her.

"Have I hurt your feelings very badly?" she said, trying to muffle her laughter. "I was merely referring to your height."

"Of course, you were," he said with evident doubt, bringing more smiles from her. "To remedy the affront, I must make a request of you."

"What kind of request?" she asked, bringing her horse alongside his. They were side by side but facing opposite ways so they could look directly at each other.

"A contest," he said. "We shall settle who is the finest rider once and for all. Otherwise, those lessons I had in Lisbon are all for nothing."

"You had riding lessons in Lisbon?" she asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

"I did," he confirmed with a nod, observing the sheer extent of amazement in her features. "You seem quite astonished whenever I

“speak of my travels.”

“I guess it is because I am,” she said softly as she pulled on her reins, ensuring Cantante stayed in place. “I have never thought that travelling was something that was really possible, yet when you speak of it...it sounds very enticing.”

“You realize you could travel now,” he said slowly, watching as her expression changed.

“Oh no, I could not. My husband would –”

“Would have no more control over you once the separation is complete,” he said with finality, watching as his words sank in. “You would have an annuity and an income. What you do with your money and your life then would be your business, not your husband’s or anyone else’s.”

“Wow,” she murmured, sitting taller in her saddle. “I hadn’t thought of that.” He could see the thought sinking in and how she grew more and more excited with each passing second, her eyes darting back and forth and her hands restless on the reins.

“That expression,” he said, pointing at her, “it’s rather how I used to look when I was a boy, and my father took me to the confectioners’ shop in Covent Garden.” She giggled at the image he presented her with. “So, you have your freedom, Lady Ridlington. What would you like to do with it first?”

“I think I owe you that contest first,” she said, turning the horse around so that they were lined up, side by side, as though on a starting line. “Name the challenge.”

“The first one to the river,” he said, pointing through the trees. The edge of the estate was bordered by the River Thames, where a small stream meandered into his estate. He gestured at this stream where it resided in the long grass near the house.

“Very well,” she said, readying her horse. “When you’re ready.”

“Prepare yourself...” he said, smirking as he inched his horse a little in front of hers.

“Oh, do not cheat, Your Grace,” she said, pulling Cantante forward a little.

“Ah, I thought I had gotten away with that. And go!” he suddenly declared the start of their race. She was clearly taken by surprise as she set off after him.

Soon, they were both racing down the hill and through the trees at a breakneck speed, but where Francis had had the initial advantage, that soon slipped away. Lady Ridlington managed to overtake him easily through the trees and by the time they reached the flat land of the lawn, she was way out in front. As they got near the stream, Lady Ridlington didn’t let up. She urged the horse to jump.

Together, she and the Andalusian flew over the stream, landing neatly on the other side, as though it had taken no effort for them at all. Francis was so busy admiring Lady Ridlington for it, he had not paid attention to his own horse suddenly snorting in objection.

By the time Francis came to try and make his own horse jump, the horse was having none of it. The steed came to a skidding halt and drew his hooves into the ground, tipping his nose forward so that Francis was thrown over the horse’s head and straight into the stream. His face and body crashed against it with the water covering him in an instant.

“Your Grace! Your Grace!” Lady Ridlington’s panicked voice was muffled by the water. As he stood in the water, finding it waist deep and turning to her, he found she had jumped down off the horse and ran back to the edge of the river, her face contorted in fear.

He quickly ascertained he was not injured at all and then looked between their two states.

“Well, I think you won the contest,” he pointed out, bursting into laughter before he could finish the sentence.

A moment later, Lady Ridlington laughed too, covering her mouth in clear relief that he wasn't hurt. This time, her laughter was completely unbidden. She didn't try to hide it or curb it as she had done in the past, she thoroughly enjoyed it. It made that jolt in his chest even stronger than before.

“Look at me,” he said, trying to shake off some of the water. “Soaked to the bone.” He ruffled his hair, trying to get rid of some of the excess. “I blame you,” he said with humor.

“Me? I didn't do anything,” she put upon a look of innocence.

“Perhaps payback is in order,” he teased her, slowly moving to the edge of the river. She began to back away from it.

“What do you intend to do?” she asked.

In answer, he shook his hands in her direction, trying to get her wet. She squealed in laughter and hurried away from the water, using Cantante as a shield who promptly snorted in his direction.

“Look at him protecting you from a little water. He loves you more than he loves me already,” Francis gestured to Cantante.

“He has good taste,” Lady Ridlington teased, peering over the top of the saddle. Her words brought even more laughter from Francis.

“That he does,” he said, hoping she hadn't heard his words. “We best get back to the stable. Before my horse tips me again!”

As they reached the stable, Francis was beginning to dry off a little, not that he minded. To see Lady Ridlington laugh so freely, he would have happily jumped willingly into that water. As they came to a stop in the courtyard, they were still talking and laughing together.

“All right, I might not be the finest horse rider between us,” he acknowledged, “but I warrant I am the better swimmer from today.”

“You were the only one who swam!” she pointed out.

“Maybe so, but I think I would have been a very cruel host indeed to insist on you taking to the water too,” he said, watching as she laughed heartily.

As he jumped down from his horse, he found the courtyard was not empty. To his left, Mrs Goodman had appeared, ringing her hands together and appearing rather nervous.

“Mrs Goodman, is something wrong?” he asked, stepping away from the horse as the stable boy took hold of the reins.

“There is someone here to see you, Your Grace. They are most insistent,” she said, shaking her head in a kind of despair.

Francis glanced once to Lady Ridlington, seeing the fear that bubbled up in her features.

He cannot possibly know she is here, especially so soon.

He prayed he was wrong, that his suspicion was unfounded.

“Who is it?” he asked Mrs Goodman.

Chapter 9

“It is the Marquess of Dodge, Your Grace. It seems...there has been an incident at his house. Your sister...” Mrs Goodman trailed off and lifted her hands to cover her face, not saying anymore.

No more need to be said. Phoebe felt her body stiffen, just as Hayward hurried off. He didn’t even glance back at her, he just rushed away, heading straight toward the house.

Phoebe’s body lost its frozen state as she shook herself into action. She practically ran after Hayward as he sprinted into the house. Mrs Goodman had only needed to say those few words in order to put the fear into her heart, and evidently Hayward’s too. Phoebe bundled the skirt of her gown in one hand as she ran, keeping it out of the way of her feet. She passed through the courtyard, following in the wake of the puddles of water that Hayward was leaving behind him.

He hurried in through the front door, dampening the floorboards with his wet shoes as Phoebe struggled to keep pace with him, running behind. In the hallway, no longer able to see him, she had to follow the sounds of a door bursting open and a voice that followed.

“Why are you all wet?” the Marquess of Dodge asked. Phoebe sprinted in the direction of the voice, emerging in the drawing room a second later, breathing heavily as both men turned to look at her. She leaned on the doorframe, unable to say words as she struggled to catch her breath. “What happened to you?” the Marquess asked, pointing back to the drenched state Hayward was in.

“Call it an accident,” he said with a wry smile. “I’d make more of a joke on the matter, but you are here for a reason, yes? Mrs Goodman, she said something has happened to Diana?”

"My Lady," the Marquess turned his attention to her. "Come in, close the door. We do not need any more of the staff to hear of this."

Growing only more and more discomfited by his words, she hurried in, closed the door and leaned against it.

"Something has happened?" she said, hearing how strained her own voice was.

"You could say that," the Marquess said with a sigh as he dropped his hat down on the nearest settee and sat beside it heavily, resting his chin in his hand. "Your husband turned up at our house, in what you could describe as the very early hours of the morning."

"What does that mean?" Phoebe asked, nervously chewing her lip.

"It was barely light yet," the Marquess explained, before turning his eyes back to Hayward. "It was as we thought. He suspected Diana and I of being the ones to take Lady Ridlington away. He insisted on seeing you," he said, nodding his head back to Phoebe. "When we explained that you were not there, that we knew nothing about it at all...he played a card I did not expect him to make."

"What was it?" Hayward asked. His deep voice had become even deeper than before, drawing Phoebe's eyes to him.

"He brought constables with him," the Marquess' words appeared to make Hayward reel on his feet. "It seems he has claimed to the constables that his wife must have been abducted."

"What?" Phoebe asked, veering away from the door and stumbling into the room.

"It seems your husband is so much of a fool that he cannot even believe you would willingly leave him yourself," the Marquess said with a shake of his head.

Phoebe couldn't understand it. Graham was a demon, she had often thought that, a demon born to a human body, but to be so willfully blind too? It did not make sense.

"No, that is not in his character," Phoebe said, finding her voice. She could see her sudden words had surprised both the Marquess and Hayward.

"What do you mean?" Hayward said, turning his bright blue eyes on her. She stilled for a minute, thinking of those blue eyes and the fun she had been having with him just minutes ago in the estate. She wanted that happy feeling back, yet it felt as far away as the stars above her now, out of reach.

"I mean I think he made such a claim for his own end," she struggled to explain. "He is not so dumb. He knows I could well leave him of my own choice, but by making a claim to the constable that I was abducted –"

"Ah, he seeks to punish someone after all this is said and done," Hayward said for her. "Whoever is hiding you, he wants punished. That would be me, on this occasion," he said dryly, gesturing to himself.

"I'm so sorry," she hurried toward him, across the room.

"No apologies, my Lady, I beg of you," he said. He took her hand. The touch startled her, she hadn't been expecting it, even though she had been the one walking toward him across the room. It was not an intimate touch, just the press of his hand against hers, like two friends meeting in the street after a long time apart, yet the touch made her feel safe. She didn't pull away from his grasp. "I knew the risk I faced last night when I agreed to hide you here," he said calmly.

She looked away from his blue eyes, down at the ground as she lifted her other hand to her neck and fiddled with the ribbon that hid the bruise there.

"You said something about Diana?" Hayward prompted, releasing Phoebe's hand as he turned his focus back to the Marquess. Without his hand, Phoebe took a step away, startled by the power that had been in his warm touch.

"You know Diana has little patience when it comes to conversation. Least of all when it comes to an argument," the Marquess said with arched eyebrows. "Finding the Viscount of Ridlington in our house, she happily marched down the stairs and said though we weren't hiding his wife, she was thrilled to hear that her friend had finally left him at last. Lord Ridlington did not take kindly to it."

"No..." Phoebe turned her head back to the Marquess, terrified of his next words. "Tell me he did not harm her."

"No, my Lady. Even he is not so great a fool as to lift a hand to another gentleman's wife," the Marquess said calmly. "But he threatened her. I have never seen Diana so angry, nor so scared."

Hearing her friend was scared, Phoebe turned away and covered her face with her hands for a second, finding the memories of all the pain Graham had caused her in the past not match up to this moment.

It is the fear. The fear that he will harm someone else.

"I should go home," she said softly.

"What?" Hayward's voice was so loud, the sudden word echoing back off the drawing room walls that Phoebe spun back round to face him. She found him standing surprisingly close to her, making her back up a step. "You want to go back to him?"

"Of course not," she said quickly, "but do I have a choice? I cannot let him harm Lady Dodge."

"So you'd let him harm you instead?" Hayward asked, crossing his arms. The logic of his statement she found surprisingly frustrating.

“Better that than let him hurt my friend,” Phoebe said, matching his stance. She could see she had surprised him. His lips parted a little as he tilted his head to the side, watching her. “What is it?” she asked.

“There are few who would sacrifice themselves so,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“The sacrifice is not necessary,” the Marquess said as he stood to his feet. Both Phoebe and Hayward turned their eyes on him, though they did not move their bodies away from being angled toward one another. “Like I would ever let anyone harm Diana. No man will come near her, least of all Lord Ridlington.”

“Do you hear that?” Hayward said, turning his gaze back on Phoebe. “So, there is no need to make such an impulsive decision to go back to him.”

“But...” Phoebe paused, looking between the two of them. “He may hurt Lady Dodge.”

“It will not come to that,” the Marquess said again, before tapping her shoulder. “Believe me, I would never let that happen. I came to speak with you as you should know that constables are involved now. Best stay indoors or on the estate as much as you can.”

“Thank you,” Phoebe said, trying to smile through her fear though it was difficult.

Hayward went to say goodbye and escort the Marquess out as Phoebe stayed in the drawing room, marching up and down the space. She tried to think of something else, anything else, but it was no good. She could imagine Graham’s face easily when he made that threat against Lady Dodge. The mere thought of the words and his reddening cheeks prompted her to adjust the ribbon that covered up her bruise.

She looked to the doorway and dropped her hand from her neck as the door opened again, revealing Hayward.

He said nothing for a minute, though he rested his weight on the door as he closed it behind him. When he said nothing, she went back to pacing, unable to let her fears settle.

“You look as though he is on my driveway right now, come to take you back and...well, lord knows do what!” His words made her flinch again. “I am sorry, I did not mean to scare you further with that.”

“No, no, you didn’t,” she said hurriedly, holding up her hands. “This fear is different. Do you not see?” she asked, turning to face him. He moved away from the door and walked toward her. “I am not the only one in danger now. My friends are. Lady Dodge is. And...and *you* are. For hiding me here.” With the words, their eyes connected. It felt a far too intimate look, so long and intense that had it been seen in public it would have been deemed scandalous.

She looked down at the floor between them, breaking the connection.

“I cannot bear the idea of any of you suffering because of me,” she said softly.

“Lady Ridlington, please listen to me, I beg of you.” He stepped toward her, until his damp boots appeared in her vision.

“You’re creating a puddle on your carpet,” she said, lifting her eyes to him at last.

“I know, so listen quickly before I end up destroying any other nice rugs around here with how drenched I am,” he said, the seriousness in his face breaking into a small jest of laughter before it faded away. “Your husband does not have any power now. He cannot hurt any of us.”

Phoebe felt her stomach tighten in objection to his words.

“You cannot know that for certain,” she said in a whisper.

“Yet I believe it,” he said, his voice strong as he took another step toward her. “Now, I want you to believe that nothing will happen to you here.”

“You can’t know that for certain either,” she pointed out with arched eyebrows.

“I can give everything I have to ensure it is the case,” he said. The depth of the meaning of his words made her breath hitch. “You’re safe here, Lady Ridlington. Believe that. Please?”

She wanted desperately to believe him.



* * *

Francis was tired of seeing Lady Ridlington still afraid. He had spent that afternoon attending to business in his library and now that the two of them were sat at dinner, he had discovered her manner hadn’t changed since that morning. Any sign of the happy woman who had ridden across the estate and jested with him had gone. In her place was the woman who had appeared the moment that she’d heard of Diana being threatened.

It was sort of like seeing Lady Ridlington’s reflection in a darkened mirror. Not appearing as she should be.

“You are still afraid,” he broke the silence between them as the butler left them to go and collect more claret at Francis’ request.

Lady Ridlington looked sharply up from her place, with her face lit by the candles that were in the center of the table. The soft orange glow lit her cheeks and shone on her green eyes, making them appear almost golden. He was somewhat lost in admiring the beauty in those features for a minute, before she spoke and

interrupted his thoughts.

"I do not have a choice in the matter, Your Grace. Fear can claim you," she said, holding his gaze. "Do you not think fear is like some kind of monster? It clings about our shoulders and the more you fight with it and tell it to go, the more it hooks its claws into you."

"You have a remarkable way with words," he said, sitting back in his chair and drinking the last of his claret. "Most people would say something simple, like fear is out my control."

"Is it odd to say more?" she asked.

"Quite the contrary, I was admiring it," he said, lowering the glass back down as he held her gaze again. There was the flicker of a smile in her features before she turned her eyes back to her plate. "Either way, my original point still stands."

"What was your point?" she asked as she cut up some of the roasted chicken on her plate to eat.

"This man has made you live in fear whilst you were under his roof, I will not let him make you live in fear whilst you are under *my* roof. Oh no, that I cannot accept at all," he said, suddenly feeling animated. Perhaps it was down to the claret, or the effect of seeing that small smile break through on her cheeks, but he was feeling playful.

"What do you intend to do about it?" she asked, looking up with her brows knitted together.

"Well, perhaps I should charge myself with the responsibility of being your entertainer as well as your host for the time being?" he asked, gesturing to himself.

"You would do that?" she asked.

"Of course. I saw last night when I met you, dancing with you, that

a smile suits you infinitely more than this fear you wear about you, like a cape from your shoulders, as you so describe it,” he said, motioning to her. “Oh no, we need to see a smile there again.” He lowered his voice to a whisper and pointed to her face, seeing the way she had flattened her lips together, as though teasing him, denying him the very smile he wanted to see.

“How do you intend to accomplish that?” she asked, lifting her chin in defiance.

“A game!”

“A game?” she asked.

“Yes. Riddles,” he said, alighting on the perfect idea.

“Oh, you have picked the worst partner for this game,” she said, sitting back in her chair. “I am dreadful at them. You’ll win very quickly.”

“Then it looks like I’ve picked a good partner. I do like to win,” he said, jesting and watching as a smile finally broke through on her lips. Feeling the jolt that had occurred in his stomach as with every other time he had seen her smile, he decided it was time to push quickly on. “I will go first, here is your riddle for you. I have hands, but no feet. I make a noise but say no words and you look at me constantly. You will hear me of every second, of every minute, of every day. What am I?”

He thought he had offered her an easy one at first, though she screwed up her face as she thought, making her small nose even cuter to his mind. “Too difficult?” he asked with a laugh.

“Give me a clue,” she pleaded.

“Very well.” He looked away from her, toward the grandfather clock at the far end of the room. She had to follow his gaze a couple of times before she sighed in realization.

"A clock," she said.

"Well done, see? Not so bad at this game after all. Your turn."

"Right, let me think..." she paused and looked up at the ceiling before lowering her gaze back to his. "I can be broken, yet I can still go on beating after that. I can be given to another, though easily lost. What am I?"

"It is a heart," he said, smiling.

"You are too quick!" she said, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table. "How is anyone supposed to beat you at this game?"

"Ask Diana, she will confirm I was the undisputed champion when we were children," he said with a laugh. "Going on your theme, I have a final one for you. I can be given as a sign of love, yet I can also be the giver of life. What am I?"

As he waited for her to answer, he was aware how close they had come, leaning toward one another on the table.

"I cannot answer it," she said whispering, her eyes looking between his. He found they had completely forgotten their food now, both too absorbed with staring at one another, wrapped up in their game.

"The answer...is a kiss," he said simply, watching as her eyes darted down to his lips. "The kiss of life, or a lover's kiss."

The idea of what it could be like to kiss Lady Ridlington took over him. He didn't doubt it could be the finest kiss he'd ever had, someone who made this fluttering feeling tremble within his stomach could certainly have power in such a kiss.

What am I doing?

Chapter 10

This...is dangerous territory!

Phoebe snapped her gaze away from Hayward's lips and looked up to his eyes. She had actually been thinking about what it would be like to kiss him. There was so much that was wrong in the moment. She was thinking of kissing a Duke! The very Duke that was hiding her from her husband and she was living with whilst she was pretending to be his cousin.

He seemed to be looking at her in exactly the same way, the curious idea of what it could be like, as his eyes dipped down to her lips.

I am imagining that.

"I...erm..." she pushed her chair back abruptly and stood to her feet. Hayward reared back in his seat, clearly startled by the movement. "I...I should retire."

"Retire? For the evening?" he said, with a smirk playing upon his lips. She turned away and stumbled out from the chair, determined not to look too long at that smirk.

"Y-yes," she said hurriedly. "I think it for the best."

"Any particular reason?" The flirtation in his voice made her snap her head back round to him as she backed up.

"No," she said, shaking her head, hoping she could perpetuate the illusion that what had occurred had not just really happened. "I am just tired – ooh!" She collided with another chair as she attempted to round the table. She managed to set it in place before she hurried off toward the door.

"My Lady, you do not need to run," he said kindly, calling after her.

"Run? I am not running. I am..." she paused in the doorway.

"Merely tired and heading to bed?" he offered the end of her sentence to her.

"Yes, exactly," she said and nodded her head. "Good night, Your Grace," she said and bobbed a curtsy to him. With the door closed, she leaned her forehead on it, tapping her forehead in reprimand there for a minute before she hurried off, running toward the staircase.

What just happened?



* * *

"So...you are not avoiding him?" Louisa asked.

"No, I am just..." Phoebe paused as the two of them came to a stop on the estate. They had reached a point in the garden where all around them was formal borders, with roses on one side, in alternate patterns of white and red, whilst on the other, foxgloves stood tall and towering, coming up to her head height or even higher. "Distracting myself," Phoebe said at last with a sigh as she busied herself with admiring the roses.

"Rather sounds like you are avoiding your host to me," Louisa said, earning a glare from Phoebe that she laughed at.

Phoebe was reluctant to admit it was the truth. It had now been two days since that dinner with Hayward where she had wondered what it could be like to kiss him. She couldn't allow herself to do such a thing again. The couple of times she had seen Hayward at dinner,

she had tried to be distant from him.

“Is there something wrong with Hayward?” Louisa asked as she followed Phoebe along the rose bushes.

“No, nothing,” Phoebe said softly.

“Nothing at all?” Louisa said.

“Oh, do not tease me!” Phoebe said, pulling another laugh from Louisa.

“I think it is best I do not spend as much time in his company as I did the first day,” Phoebe said with a whisper to Louisa as she looked around the bushes, wary of any gardeners or groundskeepers lurking nearby who might overhear them.

“Why not?” Louisa asked.

“Because it was...” Phoebe broke off abruptly, realizing just what she had been about to say. It was captivating! She had been utterly charmed by Hayward in just one day. Now, she had to spend a couple of weeks here at least. What would happen to her then if she continued to spend such time in Hayward’s company? She might be tempted to truly try one of those kisses she had pictured the other night. Such a thing could only risk her reputation!

“Oh my,” Louisa said, fanning her face for dramatic effect. “Do words fall short of how wonderful it was?”

“You are in a teasing mood today,” Phoebe said, walking along the rose bushes a little further. Since that first day, she had spent each day mostly in Louisa’s company, choosing to avoid Hayward as much as possible.

“Forgive me, I am just happy now we are here. I find happiness suits me. It makes me more carefree about the world, and really quite playful,” Louisa said with a smile that pulled another one

from Phoebe.

“Then that delights me,” she said softly. “After the past you and I have had,” she paused and looked up the sky, “I think we both deserve a little happiness.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Louisa said, “so why aren’t you smiling the way I am?”

“Well, why are you smiling?” Phoebe asked.

“Because I am free!” Louisa said. She backed up a little and spun round in the garden, with her arms wide. “Look at me,” she giggled. “I am far away from the control of *that* man’s hands. The only person who can decide anything for me, is myself.”

Phoebe knew neither of them needed to mention the man’s name. When Louisa had left her father’s house to go into service, she had ended up at a low gentry’s house as a maid, where the youngest master had taken what was a liking to her. Only...his liking had not been reciprocated. Even worse, the lack of reciprocation had made the master both domineering and harmful.

He was a long distance away from Louisa now.

“This is what you need, my Lady,” Louisa said, stopping spinning as she turned back to Phoebe. “You need to feel this free, then you will be truly happy.”

“Maybe that will come with a formal separation,” Phoebe said though she wrung her hands nervously together.

“Then hold onto that idea!”

“It is a long way off yet,” she said cautiously, remembering the threat that Graham had levelled at Lady Dodge. “I’ll hope for it, but I cannot count my chickens before they’ve hatched, as they say.”

“As you wish, my Lady.” As Louisa walked back toward her and linked their arms together, Phoebe couldn’t help wondering if there was something in her words that had saddened her friend.

The two of them walked together into the house, when Louisa hurried off to attend to some of her duties, leaving Phoebe alone to wander the house. She was heading toward the library, when in the hallway she heard the sounds of metal upon metal, clattering together.

She came to a sudden stop, fearing the loud noise and what it could mean. The noise was then followed by a growl of pain.

That was Hayward’s voice!

Phoebe didn’t think too much about her actions. She ignored all her previous pleas to stay away from the man and hurried toward the noise that was coming from a door up ahead. She ran toward it and pushed it open sharply, feeling blinded by the sunlight for a moment before her eyes adjusted.

She was in some kind of sporting room in the house, with floor to ceiling windows arched at the top and latticed at the bottom, that flooded the white floorboards with light. Squinting against the glare, she finally made out the source of all the clatter and grumbles of pain.

Hayward was fencing with an opponent. Both of them were wearing helmets and black netting masks that went over their heads, whilst their torsos had some padded protection, though they wore their normal trousers below.

“Ha!” Hayward declared as he struck out with the foil in his hands and managed to strike his opponent. Phoebe winced at the sight before she realized that the weapon was blunted and caused no harm at all. “I had my payback, at last,” he said with a chuckle as he stepped away.

“That you did, Your Grace,” the other man said as he moved back

and removed the helmet. The lowering of the mask revealed the face of the steward whose dark eyes looked toward Phoebe and spotted her first.

“Ah, Lady Isabella,” he said, bowing deeply. Phoebe did not miss the way Hayward snapped his head toward her. He removed the helmet, revealing his full face. “I hope we weren’t destroying the peace too much.”

“Well, perhaps a little,” she said, prompting a laugh from him.

“If you would excuse me, I best get back to work. Next time, yYour Grace, I hope to win,” the steward said as he returned his foil to some racking at the far side of the room and hurried out.

Phoebe turned her eyes back to Hayward to see he was still looking at her. Seeing him with his black hair all mussed from the fight, Phoebe felt a lurch in her chest, it prompted her to take a step toward him across the space.

“For a horrid minute, I thought someone was truly in danger in here,” she said, moving toward him.

“No fear of that, remember?” he said with a smile before he turned and practiced a few positions. He took some lunges with the sword raised and Phoebe watched on. The more she watched, the more her eyes danced along his figure, admiring the athleticism as well as the skill. When he turned back to face her, she had to snap her gaze back up to his face, pretending that she had not been admiring him so. “Besides, I’m quite good with this thing,” he said, holding up the foil.

“Quite good?” she asked. “Does that mean average? Or the best you know?”

“Oh, not the best I know,” he said with a shake of his head. “The best I knew was a Frenchman, Parisian. He could move a sword so fast I swear it blurred before my eyes.”

"You have been to Paris?" Phoebe asked, hanging on his words as she took another step toward him.

"I have," he acknowledged, pausing with his practicing as he played with the sword in the air for a minute. "My Parisian friend taught me well though. I am not the finest fighter I have ever met, but I hold my own against a few friends of mine."

"Modest indeed," Phoebe teased him.

"Modest or honest?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On your skill," she pointed out, earning another hearty laugh from him.

"Yes, I suppose so. In my opinion, everyone should learn to fight in this way."

"Everyone?" Phoebe asked as she walked toward him. He proffered the sword toward her, encouraging her to take a look. She slowly took it from his fingers, trying to ignore the sensation created in her body when her fingers brushed his.

She held up the sword, watching as the sunrays through the window glinted across the side. Even for such a light-looking sword, it was surprisingly heavy in her grasp.

"It's a sad fact of this world that not everyone is nice," Hayward said, turning away as he placed his helmet in the rack nearby. "As much fun as Paris was, there were a few thieves in Montmartre that were after the money in my wallet."

"Did they get it?" Phoebe asked, looking away from the sword and up to Hayward.

“Now, do you really need to ask me that?” he said, looking back to her with raised eyebrows.

“Proud indeed!” she accused him, watching as he smiled again.

“Maybe a little too proud at times, I’ll give you that,” he acknowledged with a nod. “What do you say?” he said, pointing at the sword.

“Say to what?” she asked, as she passed it between her hands. She could see how such a thing could give a man some power. Despite its slim shape, in the right situation, it could be the protection needed to survive.

“You could learn to use the weapon if you like?” Hayward’s words startled her so much that she fumbled with the sword and clattered it to the ground, jumping away from it, before looking up at him from the sword with a pretend look of innocence. “Lesson number one would be to not do that.”

“Me? Learn to fight?” she asked as she reached down to the floor and picked up the sword again. “I couldn’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“My husband would never allow it.”

“Have you not noticed yet that your husband is not here under this roof controlling you?” Hayward asked, looking around the room as though searching for him. “I would be very surprised to find him hiding here in one of my cupboards.”

She fought the smile his jesting tempted to pull from her.

“I...I have never even considered learning something like *this*,” she said, proffering the weapon back to him. “No, I couldn’t do it.”

“Why not?” he asked, taking the weapon back.

“Because...” she trailed off, thinking of the last time she had discussed such a thing. It had been years ago, long before she had married Graham. It was when she had still been in her father’s household under his direction.

“Why would a woman need to fight?” That was what her father had said one day when she expressed interest in learning something like sword skills. *“It might give them ideas above their station.”*

“My father would never allow it either,” she said eventually, not lifting her gaze to Hayward’s again.

“How strange, because I don’t see him under this roof either controlling you.” Hayward’s words made her frown, just before he took two steps toward her, closing the distance between them and forcing her to look up to him. “The only one whose opinion on this that matters right now, is yours. Would you like to learn a few skills, my Lady?”

She chewed her lip in thought and looked down at the sword in his hand another time. It struck her that if she knew some skills, just a few things, perhaps she would be better at fighting off such an attack again from Graham in the future, if she had to go back to him.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and took the foil out of his grasp.

“Shall I take that as your answer?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“Excellent.” He smiled and stepped away, retrieving some padding and a helmet from the side of the room. “First, protection!”

A few minutes later, Phoebe was threaded into some padding placed over her dress and a helmet that was so cloying with heat she was certain her hair was sticking to her neck in damp tendrils. The mesh mask across her face made it more than a little difficult to

see.

“How on earth are you supposed to fight like this?” she said with animation, trying to brush off the feeling of what is had been like to have Hayward tie up the padding around her back. It had brought the two of them close together indeed. So close that his breath tickled her ear and made he smile in a ridiculous way. “I can barely see what I am doing, let alone what you are doing.”

“It gets easier once you let your eyes adjust,” Hayward said, coming to stand in front of her. “Now, first, we’ll take a few positions, some different stances, then we will go through a practice parry.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’re going to fight.”

“Fight?” she asked, nearly dropping the sword for a second time. “Ow!” she said as she caught the sword across the blade.

“Lesson number two, if you drop the foil, don’t grab it be the blade. If this one wasn’t so blunted, that might have truly hurt,” he said as he moved the sword in her grasp.

“Stop teasing me.”

“Then do not grab the sword by the blade again.”

She could just about see his smile through the mesh material over her face.

“Now, copy me exactly,” he said, holding up a finger as he backed away from her.

“How can I if I can barely see you?” she asked, swiping her other hand in the air to make her point.

“Squint a little, you’ll get used to it. Now, position one is this, a

forward lunge...”

For the next few minutes, Hayward went into teaching her many different stances. Phoebe felt somewhat ridiculous at first, learning such things when wearing a gown, but after a minute, she began to see the use in practicing such a thing. As she got better and better at each position, with Hayward giving her less and less amendments, she felt more powerful. It was as though the blunted weapon in her hand really was the thing that kept her safe in the world. She loved the feeling.

This...this is what feeling safe feels like.

“Now, a practice parry,” Hayward said as he went to pick up a sword from the rack. Phoebe backed up a little, her eyes now having adjusted to the mesh, she could see Hayward advancing toward her.

“Yes, I can see why this would be particularly frightening in a fight.”

“You know I would never harm you.” His voice was sincere as he stopped walking. The deepness of the tone made her blush, and she was secretly thankful for the mesh over her face. “It will be a very slow parry. I’ll shout out stances for you to take and will show you how they respond to stances I would take. Ready?”

“Ready,” she said with a firm nod.

“Lunge one...” they went into a few different lunges, parrying very slowly back and forth so that the swords barely tapped one another every now and then, until Hayward spun away. “There, excellent – wait...”

Phoebe heard the ripping sound of the dress before she felt it.

Chapter 11

“Ah...” Francis said as he spun round and lifted the helmet off his head. Lady Ridlington dropped the sword instantly and clung to the dress.

“What happened?” she asked, looking up at him through the mask as she held the skirt against the bodice of the dress.

“It seems...” he paused as he looked at the way the dress was torn. At the bottom of where the padding across her torso sat around her hips, her sword had become caught in the material and ripped it. “Perhaps lesson number three should have been not to injure yourself, or your own clothes.”

“That was hardly intentional!” she said, waving one arm madly in the air. “Look away.”

“Yes, of course,” he said hurriedly turning round and placing his back to her, though he laughed all the same. “I didn’t see anything, I promise.”

“Am I amusing to you, Your Grace?”

“You are, but probably for a different reason than you think,” he said with honesty, thinking of her surprise. He was actually impressed with how quickly she was picking up the stances he was teaching her. The rip had just been so out of blue, he couldn’t help but chuckle. “You need hardly be embarrassed by such a thing.”

“Oh?” she asked, making a sound that suggested she was rearranging the dress and the padding.

“Well, in the continent, not everyone dresses the same,” he said, feeling the temptation to smirk tug at his lips. “I have seen more

than a hip before.”

“You said you didn’t see anything!” she accused loudly.

“I didn’t, I promise you,” he said, trying to control his mirth. “I just could not resist that chance to jest with you, that is all.”

“There, all done. You may turn back.”

He slowly turned round, just in case she changed her mind. She had readjusted her dress so that the torn section was caught up under the padding, ensuring that she appeared demurely dressed once again.

“Now.” She paused and picked up the sword from the floor. “Where were we?” she asked, pointing the foil at him as she took up the lunge position.

This time, Francis couldn’t control the smile that took over his features as he returned his helmet to his head.

“On my count, lunge three. One, lunge...” as he walked her through the stances once more, he found his admiration for Lady Ridlington growing by the second.

At first, she had denied wanting to learn such a skill, but now was not only picking it up more ably than he’d seen many a man could do, but was also keen to carry on, even after a rip to her dress. It was either testament to her determination to master the skill, or a testament to the fear that resided in her, about her husband coming for her.

He hoped it was the former reason. The latter made him feel cold to the bone.

They parried for a long time, until she was nearly up to speed with the maneuvers before he called a halt to their practice.

"Well, I think that should be enough for one day," he said as he pulled off the helmet. Lady Ridlington pulled off her helmet next. Her expression was different to anything he had seen before, with the eyes more alight and a softer expression on her face. "I think you enjoyed that."

"Would it be bad if I said that I did?"

"Why would that be bad?" he asked as he beckoned her over to the racks where he placed their swords and their helmets.

"I can just imagine what my father would say now to such a thing, if he knew I had done it."

"What would he say?"

"That it wasn't a woman's place to be sword fighting. It would give her confidence to argue with her husband when she should have known."

"What?" Francis was so startled by the words that this time he was the one to drop something. Well, nearly. As the helmet slipped out of his hands, he had to swipe it from the air to catch it and managed to toss it back up into the air before catching it cleanly. "Your father said such a thing?"

"He did," she said, avoiding his gaze as she fussed with a few of the tendrils that had fallen loose from her updo and were now trailing down her neck, pretending to be interested in them.

"No wonder such a man chose the Viscount to be your husband," he muttered angrily as he placed the helmet into the rack with such a clatter that Lady Ridlington flinched at his side. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you jump, it is just...hearing your father said such things, I cannot tell you how angry it makes me."

"Truly?" she asked, looking up at him, giving him her full focus.

"No man should want a woman to be afraid of him," he said with animation. "All of *this* –" he gestured to the racking around them "– it is for protection and sport, nothing more. I wouldn't ever use such a thing against a woman, and the fact that your father –"

"Your Grace?" she cut him off.

"Yes?"

"You are getting quite red in the face," she said softly.

"I am?" he asked, patting his cheek as though he could make it go away.

"I haven't seen you as angry as this before," she said, still looking up at him.

"I apologize for it."

"No, do not apologize, please. It is a good thing!" she said with a smile that surprised him. "For a while when I was little, because it was the way things had always been, I thought it was the way it had to be. That I would always do as my father said, because that's what he told me to do. I thought I was the aberration, for wanting a life that was different. It took me a while to realize I was not."

"Believe me, you are not." Francis could almost imagine his heart cracking in two at her words.

How could anyone grow up so frightened? Forced into that kind of subservience? It's not the way it's supposed to be!

"I cannot tell you how relieved I am to see you agree with me, Your Grace," she said, turning her eyes upon the rack again. "All of this, it is a simple thing, really, but it means a lot." She gestured toward the swords.

"I am glad," he said, taking a step toward her, unable to stay away.

For a brief minute, he thought he might take her in his arms, then he remembered the distance between them, the legal obligation that she was another's man's wife, and the promise he had made never to pursue a woman so. Wouldn't that be what he was doing? If he caved to Lady Ridlington and embraced her?

"It is my opinion that any man in this world should help a woman feel safe. Nothing else," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"How strange," she said, looking up to him. "I feel I should be able to look after myself, not rely on a man for that purpose."

"I agree that every woman should have that confidence," he said, nodding, "but every man out there should offer protection anyway. Any man that doesn't, is no gentleman to my mind."

Lady Ridlington said nothing in reply, though she looked up at him, those green eyes unblinking for a minute. He hadn't noticed he had moved so close toward her at first. Each of them had a hand still on the racking, and with how near he had moved, their hands were mere inches apart.

"How odd," she said, her lips barely moving with the words. His eyes darted down to those lips before looking up at her eyes again.

"What is?"

"That there are not more men that think like you," she said, smiling sadly before she looked down, staring somewhere in the center of his chest. With the feel of her gaze gone, he longed to have it back. "I...I should go," she said, stepping up away from her.

"What? Go now?" he asked, startled. It would be the second time she had ran from him since she had arrived in the house. The first day he hadn't minded too much, he had got carried away, thinking of what it would be like to kiss her. Now though, it was breaking this tender moment between the two of them.

“Yes, I need to...” she gestured behind herself, as though looking for an excuse.

“Search for an excuse to run from me?” he asked.

Her gaze snapped up to his, clearly concerned at being caught out before she turned and run, letting out a kind of exasperated sigh. He let her go for a minute before this burning need to be back by her side crept into him.

I'm not letting her run again.



* * *

Phoebe realized Hayward was following her when she was barely three steps away from the sports room.

“What are you doing?” she cried, staring back behind her.

“What does it look like I’m doing? Stopping you from running away.”

“Ever considered I am running for a reason?” she asked tartly before diving to the side in the corridor. The movement made Hayward pick up the pace and she hurried away, toward the staircase, picking up her skirt to allow her to run.

“What would the reason be?” he called after her. He took the steps two at a time, even three at a time and managed to cut her off easily in the middle of the staircase. Where it turned at a ninety-degree angle, levelling off on a small landing, he leaned on the banister, blocking her path and bringing her to a halt.

“Your Grace, must you really ask me that?” she asked, feeling her

heart thud harder at his words.

Surely, he noticed it!

Twice now she had been in his company and so close toward him that *this* could hardly be described as an acquaintance. No, not with the words he was uttering, words of promising to keep her safe, talking of her protection, and then those blue eyes of his...that kept looking back down to her lips. He could hardly not be aware he was doing it, surely?

"Hmm, I must," he said, clearly still jesting as he put upon a pained expression.

"You are not helping me right now."

"And you have ran away from me twice this week," he said, gesturing to her. "I wish to know why I am prompting my guest to run away from me."

"I am not running away from you exactly," she said, struggling to come up with a better excuse. In truth, she didn't want to run away from him. She liked him. She liked his jests, his easy manner, and how easily he could make her smile. What she had to run away from was whatever it was that she was feeling for him.

Things are already complicated enough as it is without me pondering on that thought any longer.

"Really?" he asked. "The last two days I am sure you have been avoiding me."

"I have simply been giving you space in your own house."

"By even avoiding having breakfast with me in the morning?" he asked, looking a little hurt at the idea.

"Did that upset you?" she asked.

"A little, yes," he said. "I first thought I had done something wrong."

"No, no, you have done nothing wrong," she said quickly, covering her face with her hands. "Nothing wrong at all, that is the problem."

"What is the problem?" he asked. One of his hands took hold of her wrist and pulled it down a little, just enough so that she could look up at him again. The mere touch made her heartbeat thud even harder.

"I..." She alighted on the perfect excuse. She glanced around, checking there was no one else nearby, on the staircase, on the landing above, nor in the entrance hall below, before she fixed her attention on Hayward. "I am merely thinking of propriety."

"Propriety? Everyone here thinks you are my cousin," he pointed out. "Family."

"Yes, but I am not, am I?" she said. "I think it best if I do not spend so much time in your company. If it ever got out that I was here, both of our reputations can be damaged by it."

"Hmm, I see," he said, releasing the gentle hold he had on her wrist and leaning more onto the banister. "So that is it? That is the reason you're avoiding me?"

"Yes."

"Nothing else?" he asked, a small smile playing upon his features.

"What else could it be?" she asked, pretending innocence.

"Ah, I see," he said with a small laugh, before looking down at the landing of the stairs between them.

"You see what?"

“You wish to deny what just happened?”

“Happened? Nothing happened,” she said quickly.

“What? Learning to sword fight?” he asked, jesting with her once again.

“Your Grace,” she said, placing her hands on her hips. She tried to fight the battle of her smile but found she lost when he was smiling back at her. “You are being difficult on purpose.”

“Maybe a little,” he said with a nod. “But I wish to know the true reason you are running away from me, and I have a feeling that it has more to do with the way you were looking at me just now in the sports room –”

“I wasn’t looking at you in a particular way,” she said, trying to get him to stop talking and failing miserably.

“And also more to do with our riddles about kisses the other day –”

“Your Grace!” she cried his formal address in shock as she looked around the staircase again, but there was no one there to see them together, talking in such a way.

“I am merely checking those are the things you wish to deny happened?” he said.

“You have too much mischief in you for your own good,” she said, moving to walk around him. He laughed again, though this time, he let her go. At least, she thought he did, until she heard his footsteps on the stairs. At the top, she turned and found him standing just one two steps below her.

“Before you go, there is one more thing I need to say to you,” he said, his voice pleading with her to stay another minute.

“Which is?”

Chapter 12

Francis realized that their positions had brought them nearly level in head height. With him two steps down on the staircase and Lady Ridlington on the top step, he could look her directly in the eye.

She was staring at him, waiting for him to say what he had pleaded with her to stay and hear, but now he was about to say it, the words faltered. He was distracted once again by how close they were, thinking of a kiss, something that was so out of bounds.

He looked away, far from those green eyes and down at the floorboards of the stairs between them. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to quell the fluttering in his stomach.

It had been sometime since his head had been turned by any woman, let alone someone whose life was as complicated as Lady Ridlington's was. Giving into this bond between them...this flirtation, that was yet also filled with admiration for her, well, it could hardly end well.

She is married to another for starters.

It reminded him of a time in his life long ago, when he had first experimented with the idea of love and realized that it was not an experiment that he wanted to make again. Marriage had been the same thing then that had broken his heart. He would not allow himself to risk such heartbreak again.

"You wanted to say something," Lady Ridlington was prompting him on.

He looked up from the staircase, back toward her, finding his throat a little more tightly constricted than before.

“There is no need to avoid me, my Lady,” he said, keeping his voice just a whisper. “You are in my house as a guest, not as a prisoner. I would hate for you to make yourself a prisoner whilst you are here.”

She seemed to soften at his words.

“As you wish,” she said gently. “Now, may I trust that you will not refer to this topic again?”

“Which topic?” he asked, pretending innocence, watching as her eyes narrowed on him.

“You know very well which topic.”

He couldn’t resist flirting with her a little more.

“Was it discussing what happened in the sports room or the riddle about kissing at dinner?”

“Both!” she said, throwing up her arms and hurrying away from him across the landing. He laughed softly as she turned her back before climbing up the last two steps and crossing the landing toward his own chamber.

Once locked inside, he took off his own padding and began to prepare himself for his bath before readying for dinner. After calling for the valet to prepare the bath, he sat there for some time, just in the water, frequently splashing his face with the water droplets that were growing colder and colder as he thought of Lady Ridlington and what had happened in the sports room.

“I cannot have a woman in my life,” he whispered to himself as he splashed his face another time.

He could remember that old feeling clear enough now. Like daylight after a dark night, the warmth of seeing someone he cared for again, someone that could assuage all the sadness of a stressful

day. It was a long time since he'd had that feeling.

"What a shame it had to end the way it did," he sighed as he slipped back under the water, putting his face under the surface completely.



* * *

"You can barely stand still," Hayward said, chuckling as Phoebe bobbed on her toes. She had been at his house for four days in total now and the quietness was beginning to get to her. "Are you really this excited to see my sister?"

"I am, truly I am," Phoebe said, looking away from him and back toward the door in the entrance hall where they were standing. "It can be very quiet in your house, Your Grace, I long for some company."

"Too quiet," Hayward agreed with a sigh. "I cannot bear it."

"Can't you?" she asked, turning back to him.

"Well, whilst I am pleased you are not avoiding me anymore –"

"I thought we agreed not to talk about that?" Phoebe said with a whisper, glancing toward the butler nearby who was looking out of the window, waiting for their guests' arrival.

"Yes, I remember," he said chuckling. "Let's just say I miss travelling, with all the excitement it offers."

"You mentioned Egypt the other night?" She could remember clearly their conversation over their dance where he had talked with excitement about travelling to Cairo and to see the ancient

pyramids.

"I am already planning the trip. I should be gone for a few months at least."

"A few months?" she repeated in surprise, looking back at him.

"Yes, is that a problem?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"No, no problem," she said hurriedly before turning her gaze back to the door. The butler now opened the door, revealing a glimpse of a carriage pulling up outside.

There was something about the idea of not seeing Hayward of Hayward again for months that made Phoebe shift between her feet and rearrange the ribbon around her neck self-consciously.

Must he really be gone so long?

"You are still wearing that ribbon," Hayward whispered, moving toward her side as the butler hurried out of the entrance hall and off to the carriage.

"What?" Phoebe took hold of the ribbon tighter around her neck.

"Is the bruise still visible?" he asked, pointing to her neck.

"You...you know about it?" she asked, feeling a little breathy.

"I could see it the night at the assembly," he said softly. "Is it still visible?"

"Yes, Your Grace," she said miserably, lowering her hand and looking down at the floor.

A string of curses erupted from him, so strong that she snapped her head up toward him.

"I'm sorry," he said hurriedly, "I should not use such language, but the fact that he..." He breathed in deeply then sighed. He looked pained, as though he had been physically hurt too.

Phoebe lifted a hand without thinking and placed it on Hayward's arm, trying to offer some silent comfort that she could not give with words. He didn't step out from her grasp.

"Well, I am glad to see you are still here!" Lady Dodge's voice echoed as she entered the room made Phoebe lowered her hand and turned to see her friend hurrying toward her. "I hear at one point you were threatening to return home on my account, I am relieved to see it is not the case. I hope my brother is being a good host to you," Lady Dodge said, taking Phoebe's hands and placing a kiss to her cheek.

"I am the finest of hosts," Hayward said with a falsely proud smile at himself. "I have not frightened her away yet, have I?"

As the Marquess of Dodge approached Hayward and shook his hand, they exchanged a few lower words, giving Lady Dodge the chance to loop her arm through Phoebe's and lead her toward the drawing room.

"There is much we must talk about," Lady Dodge said with a whisper.

"I heard about what my husband said to you. I am so sorry," Phoebe said, holding onto her friend.

"Oh, do not worry about that. He certainly shocked me at the time, but he has not been back to the house since, so I think we managed to convince him that we do not know where you are." Lady Dodge led Phoebe to the other side of the drawing room and urged Phoebe to sit down with her at a settee. "Now, before dinner, I wish to be certain that my brother is taking care of you, despite all his jests."

"Taking care of me?" Phoebe said with a laugh. "Well, yes, he is a very good host."

"No, I want to make sure he is being more than a host," Lady Dodge said with a soft shake of her head. "Everyone can be a good host. You have been through a lot, my friend, and your husband has sent out constables searching for you. Anyone would need someone watching over them."

"I suppose so," Phoebe said as she glanced across the room to where Hayward and the Marquess were walking in, already collecting glasses of port from a drink's cabinet at the side of the room.

He is taking care of me. The thought struck hard as she thought of all that had happened since her arrival, from Hayward's intent to see her smile, down to teaching her to sword fight. *He is a caring man indeed.*

"You can rest assured, your brother is looking out for me," Phoebe said softly, earning a great smile from her friend.



* * *

"That was an interesting dinner," Josiah said after Diana and Lady Ridlington had retired to the drawing room for tea. Francis and Josiah stayed in the dining room for a few minutes as the butler poured out two brandies for them and left them alone.

"In what way?" Francis asked, with his eyes still tarrying on the doorway through which Lady Ridlington had left.

"You and your guest seem to get on very well."

"She is easy to get along with," Francis said nonchalantly and turned back to his friend. "I have rarely met anyone like her."

"What does that mean?" Josiah asked, pausing with his brandy and

tilting his head to the side.

“Nothing,” Francis said with innocence, realizing how close he had come to singing Lady Ridlington’s praises. “She...well, she has a fine humor for one thing.”

“That is the only thing you admire in her?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So, you admire her for other reasons too?” Josiah’s words made Francis look up from his brandy glass again and offer his friend a frown.

“You are causing trouble, Josiah,” Francis warned. “Is not this situation troubling enough as it is without such jests?”

“Perhaps so,” Josiah said with a shrug, “it is merely that I have never seen you so engaged with a young lady before.”

“We have become friends whilst she has been in my house, that is all,” Francis said, wanting to believe it. He focused back on the brandy and gulped it, trying to distract himself from Josiah’s words. His liking for Lady Ridlington was troubling enough without someone else having noticed it.

“That is all? You are simply Lady Ridlington’s friend now?”

“Yes, that is all,” Francis said, pushing back your chair. “And if you continue to cause such trouble with your words, then maybe we should follow the ladies into the drawing room to put an end to the conversation.”

Josiah laughed heartily as he too stood to his feet and followed Francis out of the dining room.

“I think you are a little touchy on the subject,” Josiah whispered as they neared the drawing room.

"I am not," Francis said, keeping his gaze averted. "I am merely..."

"Avoiding the topic entirely?" Josiah teased.

"That is enough," Francis warned, earning another small laugh from Josiah. As the two of them walked into the drawing room, Francis could see Diana and Lady Ridlington look up in surprise at them being joined so soon.

"You have left dinner very quickly," Diana said, looking up from the card table where she and Lady Ridlington were playing a game.

"Conversation wasn't interesting without you two," Francis jested, relieved to see more laughter and put an end to Josiah's teasing for good.

"This is the most important part of our conversation for the entire evening, in truth," Josiah said as he delved a hand into a pocket and pulled out a closed letter. He took a seat on a settee nearby, proffering the letter in one hand and balancing his brandy glass in the other.

"What is it?" Francis asked as he sat down on the settee as well. He lowered his brandy glass down to a table nearby and took the letter from his brother-in-law's fingers.

"I have written to a solicitor in town that specializes in *these matters*," Josiah said and gestured toward Lady Ridlington in the room. She clearly heard the words as she broke off from where she and Diana had been playing cribbage and looked their way, hurriedly placing down her hand of cards.

"He has replied? Already?" Francis asked, turning the letter over.

"Yes," Josiah said, returning his focus to the brandy. "He has addressed his reply to you. He is the only one I have told that this is where our friend is staying."

Francis could see Lady Ridlington stand to her feet and cross the room, with Diana following closely behind. Hurriedly, Francis jumped to his feet and retrieving a letter opener from a nearby drawer, pulling open the parchment and the wax, to reveal the letter beneath.

To His Grace, the Duke of Hayward,

I understand that you wish to employ me to act on the behalf of Lady Phoebe Ridlington, who is currently residing in your house at this present time. From the few particulars I know, I understand there is much secrecy involved in this case. Bearing this in mind, we must proceed with caution.

I wish to meet Lady Ridlington so that we may discuss the particulars of her wishes. I know to see my arrival at your estate would no doubt cause a stir in your household, and we do not wish for tongues to gossip at this present time! In which case, I bid you to bring Lady Ridlington to my office on Fleet Street in the city in two days' time, at six in the evening. Most of my normal business will be concluded by this time and we can then be certain that Lady Ridlington will not be seen.

Please see the particulars regarding my rates of payment enclosed.

Write back at your earliest convenience.

Yours, et cetera,

Mr Norman Preston

“What does it say?” Lady Ridlington’s voice urged Francis to look up from the letter.

“He wishes us to take you into town.”

“What? Into the city?” Lady Ridlington asked, walking around the furniture and coming increasingly closer to him, the panic evident in her eyes that darted to and fro. “I would be seen! Graham has

many friends in the city. Many men who work for him too. If I go there, it would be walking back into his clutches.”

“I agree,” Diana said as she took a seat beside Josiah.

“It cannot be done,” Lady Ridlington said, taking another step toward Francis.

He lost interest in the letter. Seeing Lady Ridlington so panicked, he threw it down on the nearest table and moved toward her, gently placing his hands on her upper arms and holding her there. She seemed to soften instantly at his touch.

“There is no need to fear,” he assured her. “If that is not what you wish to do, then we will find another way.”

“Cannot the solicitor come here?” Diana asked from nearby.

“He’d be seen by the staff,” Lady Ridlington answered.

“Exactly,” Francis agreed with a slow nod.

“Then I have to go into the city?” she asked, her spine going rigid. He brushed one hand down her arm a little more, desperate to comfort her, then was relieved when her spine softened a little.

“There may be another way, we’ll think about it,” he assured her.

“That’s right, we’ll think of something,” Diana said decisively. As Francis looked to his sister and brother-in-law, he noticed the way that Josiah was looking at him. The eyes almost calculating as he glanced between Francis and Lady Ridlington a few times.

Francis snatched his hands away from Lady Ridlington, so fast, it was as though the touch had burned him, before retreating to pick up the letter again. He tried not to connect his gaze with Josiah’s, fearful of what he read in his friend’s expression.

“Where is the solicitor based?” Diana asked, moving straight back to business.

“Fleet Street,” Francis said, walking away from Lady Ridlington and putting a little distance between the two of them, before taking the armchair opposite where his guests sat.

“Right in the center,” Josiah said, shaking his head. “It’s no use, even if you went late at night, with the carriage windows darkened, she could still be seen going from the carriage to the office. If constables are out searching the city for you as well, Lady Ridlington, I fear it could be a way that they would find you.”

She was looking more and more despondent as she placed her hands on her hips and turned away from them, evidently deep in thought. Francis longed to return to her and comfort her again, but the memory of the way Josiah had watched the two of them together made him keep his focus on the letter in his hand instead.

“What if she couldn’t be recognized?” Diana asked, sitting forward in her chair.

“Have you developed some magical skills whilst I have been away on the continent, Diana?” Francis asked with a smile. “For if you can transform the way someone looks, I think that would be quite the most miraculous thing I had ever seen.”

“Such a thing is accomplishable without magic, you fool,” she said, waving her hands in his direction. “What if we were to disguise her in different clothes?”

“She stills looks like herself,” Francis said distractedly. “Those green eyes anyone can spot too easily. They’re too...”

“Noticed them, did you?” Josiah said, his tone teasing. Francis looked up from his letter, offering one glare at Josiah, realizing he had almost just confessed to the hold that Lady Ridlington’s beauty had over him.

“You’re not listening to me,” Diana said, waving her hands again.
“Lady Ridlington, tell me what you think of my idea?”

“What exactly is the idea?” she asked.

“What if we disguised you...as a boy?”

Chapter 13

“I am not sure about this,” Phoebe muttered, wringing her hands together as she paced up and down the chamber.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea!” Louisa declared as she turned back to the door.

“I agree,” Hayward said, proffering forward a bundle of clothes from where he was standing in the doorway. “Here, these should fit I think.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Louisa took the clothes from him and retreated across the room, showing them to Phoebe.

Phoebe was aware of Hayward hovering for a minute in the doorway, leaning on the doorframe and watching her closely. She tried to ignore the feeling of those eyes on her as she looked down at the clothes Louisa was showing her. There was a crisp white shirt in the bundle, along with a smart black jacket and a pair of boots.

“Whose clothes are these?” Phoebe asked.

“My valet’s. He doesn’t know. I’m hoping he’ll just think the laundry maids are taking a little too long with his washing this week,” Hayward said with a smile as he continued to watch her.

“I’m struggling to remember how you and Lady Dodge managed to talk me into this,” Phoebe said, turning away from the bundle and pacing up and down the chamber again for a few minutes, with her hands on her hips.

“I think you accepted the genius of the idea in the end,” Hayward’s words finally tore her gaze back to his. He was smirking in a mischievous way.

“You look far too happy at this outcome,” she said, pointing at him. “This is still a risk! Imagine if I am caught out in London dressed as a boy? What happens then to my reputation?”

The mischief on Hayward’s face vanished, and he grimaced instead.

“I know it is a risk –”

“My reputation could be in tatters!” Phoebe said then turned back round another time, grasping her hair at her temple with stress.

“My Lady,” Hayward’s voice pleaded with her to look back up to him. “I wish I could take away that risk, truly, I do, but if you were seen in London as you are, then we do risk the chance of you being seen by someone who knows your husband. It is the best precaution we can take.”

“I know, it is just...” she paused and fixed her gaze on him. “I have never done anything like this before.”

“Then maybe it is time to be a little more adventurous?” Hayward said with a smile. “Now, the staff are having a meeting with Mrs Goodman in fifteen minutes time. I’ll meet you downstairs then. It is the perfect chance for us to get you out of the house without anyone seeing you.”

She nodded her head to him, watching as he left, and Louisa closed the door behind him.

“Be a little more adventurous,” Phoebe repeated Hayward’s words to herself.

“Sounds like a good piece of advice to me,” Louisa said as she lifted up the clothes from the bundle. “Now, let’s get started!”

Phoebe was shocked by how quickly the transformation took place. Soon, she was facing the floor-length mirror and staring at a reflection that she did not recognize. Where a gown used to be were

now the formal clothes of a valet, with the smart black jacket and the cravat that masked the bruise on her throat. Her curves had been hidden by the bagginess of the jacket, but it was the tight-fitting breeches that made Phoebe more than a little nervous. Her legs were slim and shaped so that she looked suspiciously like a young lady rather than a young man.

“What do you think?” Phoebe asked Louisa who walked up behind her.

“Hmm, it’s not quite right, it is. Oh, I know, turn around.” Louisa begged Phoebe to spin round to face her. Louisa fussed with Phoebe’s hair a few minutes before urging Phoebe to turn back to the mirror.

With her hair tucked up beneath a low-lying flat cap, she looked quite different. From how low the hat had been pulled down over her face too, it hid some of her features.

“I think you’re ready, my Lady,” Louisa said, jumping on the spot and clapping her hands.

“Right. Here we go then,” Phoebe breathed deeply, trying to find some courage as she left the room.

Hurrying through the house, she descended the stairs, constantly looking back and forth in case there were any staff around that had avoided Mrs Goodman’s meeting. When she reached the entrance hall, she found Hayward waiting by the open door.

He flicked his head toward her as she arrived, and a smile spread across his features.

“Convincing?” she asked with hope, standing primly with her feet together.

“Not entirely,” he said with a chuckle.

“Oh dear,” she sighed.

“It’s not so much the appearance as your mannerisms,” he said, hurrying toward her. “For one thing, stand with your feet apart, and you may need to adopt a deeper voice.”

“How’s this?” she asked, affecting a deeper tone as she jumped, placing her legs further apart.

“Much better,” he said then winked at her. The simple wink made a fluttering sensation in her stomach grow. “Now, we best be quick.” He beckoned her to follow him outside.

They stepped out toward the carriage that awaited them. Without a footman in attendance, there was just the coach driver, who was so busy ensuring the horses were ready to leave, that he didn’t notice when Hayward urged Phoebe to step into the carriage before him.

“All ready, James,” Hayward called to the coach driver, climbing into the carriage too.

“Right, Your Grace, we’ll leave now,” James called back.

With the carriage door shut, the horses lurched forward, and the carriage was pulled away across the driveway. At first, Phoebe peered out through the window, intrigued to see a bit of life in London after spending so many days in one house, but soon, she retreated back from the window and pulled her hat low over her face, just in case she saw anyone in the streets who could recognize her.

“Do you think I’m convincing enough?” Phoebe asked, turning to Hayward.

“You only need to convince anyone who casually looks your way. Once we get to the solicitors, you can drop the act,” he said with a smile. “I do not think I have ever seen you so nervous.”

Phoebe tried to quell her trembling hands by clasping her palms together, but it did little to help.

“Well, it seems I must distract you then.”

“Distract me?” she said in surprise. “How?”

“Have I ever told you that I have been to Venice?” he asked, waiting for her reaction.

“Venice? What was that like?”

It was only a few minutes later Phoebe realized how successful Hayward had been in his mission to distract her. She became so caught up in hearing of his travels to Venice, of seeing the canals, the narrow houses, St Mark’s Basilica and more such beauties, that the trembling of her fingers had stopped, and all that she was interested in was hearing more of his travels.

Sat in the carriage together, Phoebe had angled her body more toward Hayward at the side of her, hanging on his every word. They talked for so long about Venice, that she didn’t even notice that they had arrived, not until there was a tap on the carriage door and she jumped to high heaven.

“Good lord, Josiah, you frightened her half to death!” Hayward said as he turned and opened the carriage door. It revealed on the other side the Marquess of Dodge who was standing on the pavement, looking up and down around him.

“Apologies, but I think now is the best chance we’ll have to get Lady Ridlington inside with as few people seeing her as possible.” He beckoned Phoebe forward. She followed the gesture quickly, out of the carriage and looked up and down the street as well from under the brim of her hat.

Fleet Street was a busy place, though most people seemed to be heading home for the evening, each person absorbed in their own

business and barely looking at the carriage. Phoebe bent her head once more and looked away from the street, following the Marquess through the nearest door and into one of the townhouses, with Hayward close behind her.

Inside, the Marquess and Hayward exchanged a few words with a young secretary, who then pointed them through to a room on the second floor. Walking into the office that was lined with books, a little like a library, with a desk in the middle and an abundance of chairs to sit in, Phoebe felt out of place. It was as though she was walking into a world that her father and husband had always banned her from.

It is as much my world as it is theirs, remember that. She supposed she would just have to get used to being in such places if she was to obtain her separation.

“Right, where is the Lady Ridlington?” a voice asked. Phoebe turned round to see that there was actually a man in the room. Small, weedy and with features rather pointed, like that of a mouse, he looked up from where he had been standing in the far corner reading some books.

“I am Lady Ridlington,” Phoebe said, using her normal voice as Hayward beckoned her forward.

“Ah,” the solicitor’s eyes widened in amazement before he stepped forward and snatched up a pair of spectacles from his desk and placed them on the bridge of his nose. “Well, that is quite a terrific deception, my Lady. You had me quite fooled!”

“Thank you.”

“I am Mr Norman Preston,” the solicitor said with a bow. “It is good to see you again, Lord Dodge,” he turned and bowed to the Marquess. “And you must be the Duke of Hayward,” he addressed Hayward at last.

“I am. It is good to meet you,” Hayward said, offering his hand to

shake.

“As it is to meet you. Now, let’s sit down,” the solicitor urged them all to take seats. Phoebe was rather startled when Hayward pulled out a chair for her to sit in, urging her to sit before him. It felt rather odd to still be treated like a fine lady when she was dressed as a boy. “I understand from the Marquess that you wish to file for separation, my Lady. I have agreed to take on the case, but I wished to speak to you, so that you know of the difficulties on such occasions as these.”

“What do you mean?” Phoebe asked, sitting forward in her chair.

“Marriage law is somewhat...skewed,” Mr Preston said painfully as he slid some papers across the table and began to flick through. “It is regrettably always in favor of the gentleman. In terms of getting an annuity out of your husband too for the rest of your life, your husband is better placed in law to argue against the value and get such a thing reduced.”

“I see,” Phoebe said quietly. “You wished to see me because you wish to tell me that my chances of success are slim?” She froze in the chair, aware that either side of her the Marquess and Hayward were fidgeting uncomfortably, clearly disquieted by this news.

“In a way, yes,” Mr Preston sighed with the words and paused flicking through his paperwork. “That is not to say that such cases can’t be won in the favor of the lady, but we usually have to be more artful. Especially if the gentleman does not wish to have the separation, then the stakes are even harder.”

Oh Lord, why did I ever think this was even possible? Phoebe gripped the sides of her chair as the thought struck home.

“What is it you need?” Hayward spoke up. “In order to settle the case in Lady Ridlington’s favor.”

“The ecclesiastical court requires quite a lot in order to obtain what we call *divortium a mensa et thoro*,” the solicitor winced with his

own words. "By law if a woman walks out on her husband without a good reason, he has the right to find her and drag her home again."

Phoebe flinched at the words.

"I think it best we opt for different language, Mr Preston," Hayward said cautiously. Phoebe glanced between the two of them, realizing Hayward was saying such a thing for her sake.

"The words can't hurt me, Your Grace. It is fine," she said with feeling, watching as his lips flickered into the smallest of smiles before it was gone.

"You said unless there was a good reason," Hayward turned back to the solicitor. "What would be the reason?"

"Adultery," the solicitor said with a nod. "If it can be proved a gentleman was disloyal to his wife, then that can often produce a divorce."

Phoebe shifted in her seat. She didn't think Graham had ever been disloyal to her, partly because he had never had much interest in that side of life to begin with. He would always much rather hurt her than be intimate with her.

"You say that like it isn't a certainty," the Marquess of Dodge spoke up, shaking his head in disbelief.

"It's not," Mr Preston said, looking between them all. "I am afraid I have seen many divorces settled if a woman is unfaithful, a man seems to somehow withstand the slight to his character. Often in the court it must be proven that the husband is physically cruel to the wife as well. *That* is a certain way to obtain the divorce."

"Physically cruel?" Phoebe asked, moving to the edge of the chair again.

"I think you have your way to obtain a separation sorted," Hayward said. Phoebe snapped her gaze toward him, fearful of what he was suggesting. It meant possibly going up in court to talk of all the different ways that Graham had hurt her over the years. She would have to talk about those moments, to a room full of men, who might well sympathize with a man who tried to keep his wife under control.

"Did he abuse you, my Lady?" Mr Preston asked with a gentleness to his words.

She nodded, unable to admit it aloud.

"Is that enough?" Hayward asked.

"To be honest, not always. If we can add witness testimonies to seeing bruises, proof of the abuse, then we are getting somewhere," the solicitor said.

"Then you can have my testimony. I've seen the bruises," Hayward said confidently. Phoebe snapped her head toward him, startled he was so ready to stand up in court for her.

"You can add mine too," the Marquess said, making Phoebe look back to him too.

"My Lady?" Mr Preston asked, gesturing to her. "Do you bear any bruises now? Then I can claim I have seen them as well."

With shaky fingers, she lifted a hand to the cravat around her throat and pulled down the material for him to see the bruise.

"Will this do?" she asked, knowing the bruise was still not recovered. What had been purple and blue before was now yellowing, but the finger marks were still plain to see around her throat. The solicitor nodded with widened eyes, looking as afraid as Phoebe had felt the night that Graham had grabbed her.



* * *

“Where is the carriage?” Phoebe said with worry as they stepped out of the solicitor’s office.

“It is just a few minutes’ walk down the street, the driver will have had to pull up at the end,” Hayward said, gesturing down the road. He appeared as unsettled as she was.

They had left the Marquess behind to discuss the particulars of the money, whilst Hayward insisted on returning Phoebe home as soon as possible.

“I cannot believe you may have to stand up in court to prove something like abuse,” Hayward muttered as she hurried along beside him. “What is wrong with this world? It’s been born backwards!”

Phoebe could see his anger was raging, but her mind was being drawn elsewhere, to the people around them as they walked to the end of the road. It was growing dark, and she did not miss the way a couple of people were looking their way. She adjusted the hat on her head, nervous of her true face being seen.

“Is it not maddening?” Hayward asked, glancing back at her before walking ahead again.

“Of course, it is,” she said, hurrying alongside of him. “But if it obtains the separation –”

“I pray to God that your husband sees sense and agrees to a separation so that it may never come to the courts,” Hayward said, now so angry that his face was turning red.

"I pray for that too," Phoebe said as she grew aware of footsteps behind them. In the darkness, she looked back, seeing a shadowy figure that was now pursuing them. "Your Grace?"

"I cannot believe this," Hayward said again, throwing his arms up in his fury. "Even the solicitor wanted to see the bruises. My word and Josiah's weren't enough."

"Erm...Your Grace?" Phoebe tried to interrupt him and pull on his jacket sleeve, but he barely noticed. His determination to reach the carriage quickly, coupled with his anger appeared to have blinded him.

Phoebe looked back, aware that whoever was following them down the road was getting closer and closer. They were now so near that she could see their clothes. They were dressed poorly, with their jacket in rags, and a patchworked hat. He delved a hand into his pocket and pulled out something – it glinted in the light from an oil-lamppost nearby.

It's a knife.

"Your Grace!" Phoebe screamed the words this time.

Chapter 14

Francis heard the scream. It tore through his anger and his focus on returning to the carriage. He whipped round, taking hold of Lady Ridlington's arm and pulling her back. Whatever had made her scream had frightened her.

"What is it?" he asked, still with his hand on her arm.

"Look out!" she cried, pointing behind him.

He heard the woosh of someone trying to strike through the air. Reminded of the days in Montmartre where thieves had tried to take his wallet. He struck up with his arm as he spun round.

He managed to block the blow that was coming his way. With his forearm against the forearm of their attacker, the knife hovered in the air, glinting in the lamplights from nearby.

Francis acted quickly. He reached for the knife as he kicked out, colliding with the man's shins and knocked him away. He took the knife cleanly into his grasp, before the man approached again.

This time, the man walked toward Lady Ridlington, instead of Francis, clearly judging her as the easy target. Francis stepped in front of her, pushing Lady Ridlington further back. She clung onto the back of his jacket, her head peering round his arm as the attacker moved forward.

"Stay back," Francis warned the man, adjusting the knife in his grasp, but the attacker didn't seem to notice the words. His eyes slipped to Lady Ridlington, then his face altered into one of surprise.

Oh no...he can see she is not a boy.

With the knife safely in his left hand, Francis lashed out with his right, punching the attacker clean in the nose and breaking it. The man fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes, clinging to his nose and wailing in the air.

As the adrenaline of the fight settled, Francis became more aware of his surroundings. There were other people in the street looking their way, intrigued by the fight, their outlines only just visible in the long shadows of the growing night. Lady Ridlington was two steps behind him, breathing heavily, evidently with fear. The man on the ground continued to wail about his nose as he attempted to get back to his knees.

“What were you after?” Francis asked, pocketing the knife to ensure it could not be used again. “Money?”

The man nodded.

“We should call a constable,” a voice went up in the street. “You there, boy, fetch a constable!” A gentleman ordered a young lad.

“A constable?” Lady Ridlington’s high pitched voice terrified Francis. If a constable got involved in this matter, then her disguise could be blown, and the Viscount could find her.

“No!” Francis said the word surprisingly loudly, turning his head round to the gentleman who had called for the constable and was quickly approaching. “No constable will be necessary. Thank you for the kindness, but the matter is resolved.” He kicked out at the thief’s arm who fell back on the floor, holding his bloodied hands up in surrender. He clearly had no intention of getting up again.

“I must insist, besides, my footman has already gone to fetch the constable,” the gentleman said as he reached their sides.

Hearing this, Francis whipped round and grabbed Lady Ridlington’s hat, pulling it further down over her face to ensure she could not be seen.

“Are you all right?” the gentleman addressed Francis.

“I am fine, thank you for the concern, but the constable is really not necessary.”

I have to get Lady Ridlington out of here. As soon as possible!

“He will be on his way already, I do not doubt it,” the gentleman said, gesturing down to the thief with a cane. “Good reason for it. Someone like him deserves to be locked up.”

“Any other time I would agree with you, but if you would forgive me, today I have somewhere else to be.” Francis took hold of Lady Ridlington’s arm and ran down the street with her, pulling her after him.

“Wait! You there? Why are you running?” the gentleman called after him, but Francis had no intention of answering him or going back. He merely focused on the path up ahead and the carriage at the end of it that was waiting for them.

Lady Ridlington was struggling to keep up, so much so that Francis switched his hold from her arm to her hand, pulling her forward with their hands clasped together.

He just had to get her out of there, now.

Once he reached the coach, he shouted for the coach driver to be ready to go, hardly caring anymore if he saw Lady Ridlington dressed as a boy or not. They had to get out of there before a constable arrived, that was the only thing that mattered now.

“James! We’re leaving, now.”

“Yes, Your Grace, all set.”

With his hand still in Lady Ridlington’s, Francis pulled her into the carriage and closed the door heavily, just before the coach set off.

One glance through the window showed that quite a crowd had gathered around the would-be thief, with the gentleman still standing by, clearly waiting for that constable to arrive.

“A constable?” Lady Ridlington’s voice made Francis snap his gaze away from the window and turn back toward her. She was sitting on the edge of the bench beside him, her eyes wide and breathing heavily having run so fast. “What if –”

“No one saw you,” Francis said with feeling. “You need not worry about that.” Yet he was not convinced by his own words. For one horrid minute in the fight with the thief, he had been certain that the thief had seen Lady Ridlington was no boy.

What does it matter though if a thief saw her?

“Do you think you were recognized?” Lady Ridlington asked.

“No,” he said, feeling confident. “I did not recognize that gentleman. It has been a while since I was so regular at events in the ton, and I didn’t see anyone else in the street I knew either.”

“Then...no constable will come and visit you?”

“Let’s hope not,” he said tightly. If a constable did come to visit him at home, he would just have to ensure that Lady Ridlington was still well hidden in the house.

“You stopped him.”

“What?” Francis said, his gaze settling on her face. She pushed the hat up a little with her free hand, revealing her complexion had turned a little pale. He lost himself thinking of those beautiful features that were still contorted in fear. It was not the way they belonged. Lady Ridlington should have been enjoying life to the full, not scared of the law coming and knocking on her door.

“You stopped him so easily. You knew what to do, how to stop him

before he...before he could hurt you,” she said, her words holding a kind of marveling tone in them.

“I wasn’t going to give him a chance to hurt either you or I with that knife,” he said with animation, shaking his head. When the thief had moved toward Lady Ridlington, Francis had been surprised by the sheer jolt of fear in his stomach.

I can never let any harm come to her.

She held his gaze for a minute, just as he realized that their hands were still entwined. It was an intense moment, with their eyes on one another and that tight grasp between them.

What am I doing!? The thought tore through the intensity of the moment. All want to keep her close vanished when he thought of the scandal that could ensue if he got his emotions tangled up with Lady Ridlington.

He snatched his hand away and turned, breaking the connection between them. The two of them descended into silence, the only sounds being that of the heavy breathing from running.

“Are you all right?” he asked after a minute of quiet, still worried for her safety after the fight.

“I am fine. I am absolutely fine,” she said with a small laugh. The sound startled him. “I have had an idea.”

“What is that?”

“Teach me.”

“Teach you what?” he asked.

“Teach me how to fight like that.” Her words made him look back to her.

“Are you sure you want that?” he asked.

“I have never been so certain of anything,” she said. The strong way in which she had spoken, and her spine had straightened made her look like a grand regal lady, despite the boy’s clothes and cap she wore. Francis thought she belonged at that moment at the front of a ballroom, commanding attention of everyone around, not stuck in a carriage with him in hiding. He admired her, more than he could say.

“Very well. Training starts tomorrow,” he said, watching as she smiled.



* * *

“Ah! It’s no use,” Phoebe cried as she dropped the sword another time. Hayward went to pick up the weapon as she turned away, placing her hands on her hips and sighing at the lack of progress she was making.

That day, Hayward had started on her lessons, deciding it was best to progress a little more with fencing first, before he intended to teach her some hand-to-hand combat skills.

“I can’t get used to the force of it,” Phoebe said, bending back her right hand and cracking the bones there. “Ow.”

“It is simply that your wrist is not yet strong enough to bear the weight of the swords clattering,” Hayward said as he followed her across the room, proffering the sword toward her to take it again. “Trust me, you will grow stronger in time.”

“Trust you?” she said. “You are the reason my dress got torn the last time we did this.”

"Me?" he said in mock offence. "You ripped it with your own sword."

"Clearly it was down to my instructor's lack of teaching skills," she said, smirking despite the mask covering her face. She watched as Hayward tipped his head back, with the helmet still on his head and laughed heartily.

"Yes, I suppose I had that coming," he said as he controlled his mirth. "Now, try again, and don't drop your wrist so much."

"Very well."

"Ready?"

She paused and settled herself, lifting the sword a little as she adopted the wide stance Hayward had taught her. He took the same stance opposite her.

"I'm ready," she said softly.

"Go," he instructed, leaping forward again. They had now increased the speed of their practice parrying, so that though they were going through the same maneuvers, yet they were a lot faster, up to speed. Phoebe frequently struggled with trying to maintain her hold on the sword with Hayward's foil against her own.

She managed to take the first few stances he had taught her with ease, and then push his sword off hers with a rallying lunge.

"Ha! There we go. You did it. And you didn't drop the sword this time," he said, gesturing to her with his weapon.

"I guess it does get easier," she said, though she still flexed her wrist at the soreness that lingered there. "How does this help me to win a fight though? It is just the same routine each time."

"I am getting you used to the movements for now," Hayward said as

he began to walk around her. "What comes next is thinking of what to do to block someone's attack."

"How do you mean?"

"For example. If I did this..." he paused with his words as he lunged toward her, stopping with the sword inches from her padded chest. "What would you do?"

"I would do this," she did the blocking movement he had taught her.

"Excellent. See? You're then no longer doing a routine that I have taught you but thinking of the blocking positions to stop someone's advance." He walked round her another time. She followed him with her eyes, feeling how close he came these days at will, with barely any hesitation. "What if I did this?"

He did a lunge she hadn't seen before, attacking from a new position entirely. She jumped away and performed another of the blocking maneuvers he had taught her. It worked perfectly, swiping his sword away.

"You're learning fast," he said with a smile. "Shall we take a break?" he asked, lowering the mask from his head. He wandered over to the side of the room where some water had been left for them and he took a few sips. Phoebe followed him with her eyes, watching him for a while as she stood still and fiddled with the foil.

Practicing sword skills with him was having an effect on her she had not expected, one that made her watch every movement he made with care, admiring each move and the athleticism behind it. Feeling her cheeks blush, she turned away and practiced a few lunges, relieved the helmet she had left over her face hid her blush completely.

"Come on, it's time you took a break, or you'll exhaust yourself." His voice sounded a little nearer than she had expected. She turned round, startled to find he was right behind her. As she stumbled

back, she brought up the sword, he dodged the blow, but only just, before a ripping sound tore through the air.

He burst out laughing in response, just as Phoebe settled her gaze on what it was that she had done. She had managed to cut through some of the padding on his arm, leaving a little of the forearm exposed.

“Please say I didn’t hurt you?”

“You didn’t hurt me,” he said, controlling his laughter. “Though I rather think you did that on purpose.”

“Would I do such a thing?” she asked innocently.

“Hmm, I am not sure,” he said with a smirk. “You have paid me back for not stopping you from ripping your own clothes now, haven’t you?” he said as he passed her a glass of water to drink.

“I thought you said these swords were blunted.”

“They are, but they are still blades,” he said. “Catch them at the wrong angle and they can cut. As you can so clearly see.” He gestured down to the new opening in the shirt beneath the padding. “You trying to get me out of my shirt, my Lady?”

“Your Grace!” she snapped the words at the flirtation, watching as he laughed even more. “That is hardly proper.”

“Perhaps not, but your reaction was certainly amusing,” he said, still being mischievous.

“You should be careful, I have a weapon in my hands remember,” she teased him, holding up the sword between the two of them.

“Consider me warned,” he said, backing off away from her. “Now, to serious matters for a minute.”

“Serious matters? I don’t remember agreeing to that,” Phoebe said as she moved to the side of the room and placed her foil back in the rack, before lifting her glass of water to her lips to quench her thirst.

“You want to suspend reality for a little longer?”

“Yes please,” she pleaded, watching as he smiled again and poured himself another glass of water from a jug that had been provided. “I like ignoring reality for a while.” She had to admit it was nice to forget the real world when she was here alone with Hayward.

Here with him, she didn’t have to think of the husband that was searching for her, neither did she have to think of Mr Preston who was sending his first letters to the Viscount today to request the separation. She rather feared how Graham would react when he read the letter. *He’ll probably throw something. Perhaps one of my mother’s old vases and smash it to smithereens.*

“One you have your separation –” Hayward began, but Phoebe cut him off.

“If I have my separation.”

“Let’s take a glass half full attitude,” he said, gesturing down to his glass of water. “*Once* you have your separation, what will you do?”

Phoebe paused and looked away from Hayward, around the room, thinking on his words.

“I could do anything I wanted I suppose,” she said quietly, thinking of all the options that were laid out before her.

“Anything. What would you do first?”

“I...” she paused as an image popped into her head. It was of Louisa spinning round in the garden with her arms out wide, talking of freedom. “I want to take Louisa far away from here, to start life

anew.”

“What?” Hayward looked full of surprise. “Why?”

Phoebe crossed the room slowly toward him and placed her empty glass back down on the table as she stood beside him.

“I am not the only one who has suffered at a cruel man’s hands,” she whispered the words, watching as Hayward’s lips parted in surprise. “I was able to help her once to get away from a man that haunted her, and I cannot bear the idea of it happening to her again. I want to take her away, to a life that need not have any fear in it.”

“That I was not expecting you to say,” Hayward said and turned a little, so that he was perching on the edge of the table beside them. With them closer to head height, Phoebe could look up and see he was staring at her intently. “You are about to be free of a man who has hurt you, and your first thought is for another. That has to be... one of the most selfless things I have ever heard.”

He was staring at her with an expression she could not understand.

“That is a rather intent stare, Your Grace,” she said softly.

“I am finding it harder and harder these days not to keep staring at you,” he whispered.

The meaning hit home, yet Phoebe didn’t step away from Hayward. She stayed exactly where she was, aware of his words and the way he was looking at her.

He is looking at me with longing.

“Your Grace, Your Grace!” a voice called at the side of the room. Phoebe stepped away and turned, putting distance between her and Hayward as Mrs Goodman appeared in the doorway, flustered with a hand on her chest.

“What is it?” Hayward asked.

“It is the Marquess of Dodge again. He says it is urgent.”

Chapter 15

Francis hurried through the drawing room door, still feeling flustered. He wasn't sure if it was Mrs Goodman's words or the moment he had just shared with Lady Ridlington, but the world felt a little less solid beneath his feet. He hurried into the room, aware that Lady Ridlington followed behind him, as he sought out where Josiah was.

"Josiah?" he said, turning to see his friend hovering by the window. "What has happened?"

"Two things," Josiah said carefully before bowing his head to Lady Ridlington. "This may be unpleasant to hear, my Lady."

"Words cannot hurt me anymore," she said hurriedly, waving her hands in the air. "What has happened?"

Francis felt the growing admiration for her again before he turned his head to Josiah.

"Diana went shopping today in Broad Street. Her carriage journey back was an *interesting* one," Josiah said, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"You do not mean interesting, do you?" Francis said, feeling his hands clench into fists at the side of his body.

"She had an accident."

"An accident?" Francis repeated in horror, stepping forward as Josiah outstretched his hands and took Francis' shoulders.

"She is fine, she is uninjured," Josiah said, his voice firm. "Yet it does not take an expert to see that her carriage was vandalized."

"You mean that someone did it on purpose, don't you?" Lady Ridlington asked from where she stood close by, her green eyes darting between them. "You mean that her carriage was sabotaged."

"It certainly looks that way," Josiah said tightly, releasing Francis' shoulders. "The wheels were loosened."

Lady Ridlington's hands flew up to her face and she covered her mouth, stumbling back in shock. Francis walked toward her, unable to stay away. He reached for her arm and drew her to sit down in an armchair nearby.

He couldn't tell her not to be frightened, as much as he wished he could. Diana's health had been in jeopardy.

"He tried to hurt her?" Lady Ridlington asked. "He followed through on his threat."

"We can't know it was the Viscount for sure," Josiah said, though he stood perfectly still, his face betraying that he suspected it was. "Though I am pretty confident."

"She is unharmed?" Francis asked as he sat in a stool in front of Lady Ridlington. He had to be doubly certain that his sister was safe.

"She is fine. For now, she is not leaving the house, not until I can guarantee this mess is over." He sighed before reaching into his jacket. "Then, there is this."

He proffered an opened letter to Francis to read. He took it, seeing that on the back it was addressed to Lady Ridlington and had been left at Josiah's house.

The handwriting was untidily scrawled, done in an angry rush.

Phoebe,

How dare you leave in the dead of night like some animal? You are my wife. You are bound to me by law and you will come back to me. Rest assured that the longer you are away, the more painfully you will pay for this when you return.

You have risked my reputation, as well as your father's. You have brought a stain on all our names by disappearing so. You will come back to me, or you will find your friends will meet more and more accidents.

Your husband,

Graham, Viscount of Ridlington.

Francis nearly crumpled the letter in his hand out of the fury that was pumping through his veins when he looked up. To his horror, he found that Lady Ridlington had read the letter too, peering at it in his grasp.

“My Lady, please, do not be afraid –” He didn’t get out anymore words. She had jumped to her feet so fast that he nearly fell off the stool. She ran to the drawing room door and burst out of it, her footsteps on the staircase followed a few seconds later.

Francis hurried to set himself on the stool, staring after her as a feeling cut through him, strongly.

It wasn’t just that he couldn’t bear the idea of anything happening to her. He couldn’t bear to see her this sad or frightened either. He cared for her. Deeply. Somehow, despite all his assurances to himself that caring for a young lady never ended well, his own heart had betrayed him.

That heart had become entangled with Lady Ridlington despite his say so.

“You can follow her in a minute,” Josiah said, clapping Francis on the shoulder to earn his attention. “Diana truly is fine, and if Lady Ridlington is tempted to back out now, then Diana will never accept

it. She and I both know what the Viscount is doing with this. He intends to use scare tactics to frighten Lady Ridlington out of her hiding place.”

“I worry it might just work, looking at the way she ran out of here,” Francis said as he threw the letter down on the floor. He was tempted to ask the butler to start a fire, despite the heat of the day, just so that he could burn the letter, and burn the Viscount’s words, obliterating them to ash.

“You realize what this is though, don’t you?” Josiah said, picking up the letter from the floor. “This is an admittance that the Viscount knows Lady Ridlington left of her own accord. That this tale of a kidnapping he has told the constables and the magistrate is a complete lie. We need to hold onto it.”

“You are right,” Francis said, nodding his head. “Such a threat in writing could be useful for her separation, especially if it reaches the courts.”

“I will deliver it to the solicitor on my way home,” Josiah said, folding up the letter and pocketing it once again. “Now, one more thing before I go.”

“What is it?” Francis asked, looking up but not turning his eyes to his friend. Instead, he turned his eyes to the doorway through which Lady Ridlington had run through, thinking of the fear in her face.

I care for her. How did that happen? When did that even happen? Somehow a flirtation and an attraction had turned into something else. There was a bond, deep and riveting.

“You’re not listening to me,” Josiah’s words made Francis stand and turn his gaze to his friend.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“Keep an eye on her,” Josiah said, pointing out the door. “Although from the way you watch her so much, I guess you’re doing that already.”

“Josiah,” Francis said tiredly, walking past her friend.

“What? Am I not allowed a few teases?” Josiah said with a small laugh. “I rather need the distraction to be honest, a reason to smile after what just happened to my wife.”

“Call it bad timing,” Francis said. “And...ill placed.”

“Ill placed? Ha! You expect me to believe that,” Josiah said, walking toward him. “Francis, it might surprise you to learn that I know you quite well by now.”

“You don’t say?” Francis said with sarcasm.

“Exactly,” Josiah said, pointing at him. “I have never seen you besotted the way you are with Lady Ridlington.”

“I am not besotted!”

“Oh really? Then why aren’t you back on your travels already?” Josiah said, holding his gaze.

“I am helping Lady Ridlington,” Francis said with feeling.

“That you are. Yet you are going to her solicitor’s meetings too, you take her in your arms as though you have known her your whole life.” Josiah pointed to the armchair where Francis had easily taken hold of Lady Ridlington and steered her to sit down.

“I was just trying to comfort her.”

“Were you?” Josiah asked. “You teased me a lot when I started falling for Diana. I’ll certainly be teasing you too.”

“Josiah, please.” Francis held his hands up in the air, calling a pause to their conversation. “Do you not think this situation is a little different? Diana was hardly running from anyone when you started courting.”

“You want to court Lady Ridlington?”

“I didn’t say that!” Francis said quickly. “It is just...whatever you think you can see between Lady Ridlington and myself can never be.”

“Why? Because of her husband, or because you vowed never to marry?” Josiah asked, walking toward the door, signaling the conversation was coming to a close.

“Does it matter which is the reason?” Francis asked, watching as Josiah paused in the doorway and looked back to him.

“It matters a great deal, Francis. Think about it.” He turned and walked away, leaving Francis alone to his thoughts.



* * *

Phoebe hurried through the door of the chamber, looking for Louisa. Her friend looked up from where she had been arranging some flowers on a table on the far side of the room.

“What do you think, my Lady? Dahlias. Aren’t they beautiful?” Louisa said and looked up from her task.

Phoebe felt the tears begin to fall as she ran forward.

“What is it?” Louisa asked, pushing away from the table. Phoebe couldn’t answer her, she just hurried toward her maid and fell into

her arms.

Together, the two women embraced for many minutes, clinging to one another, as Phoebe cried on Louisa's shoulder. It was some time before she felt at liberty to speak. Louisa had towed her toward the window seat where they sat together, and Phoebe tried to dry her tears with the backs of her hands.

"What happened, my Lady? Has he found us?"

"No," Phoebe said. "Not yet, but he wrote me a letter. He has vowed punishment for this, and he has vowed to hurt my friends until he finds me. Lady Dodge is in danger! All because of me." Phoebe took her friend's hand and squeezed it tightly. "I knew this dream was too good to be true. It cannot last, Louisa. I must go home. I cannot let this go on any longer."

"I will hear of no such thing." The voice that entered the room stunned her.

Phoebe whipped her head round to see that in her hurry to find Louisa, she had left the door open. In the doorway, Hayward now stood, his face a perfect picture of anger. Phoebe could feel the power of those blue eyes staring at her.

"Your Grace, this is over," Phoebe said, standing to her feet, though she still clung onto one of Louisa's hands. "I cannot risk your sister's welfare for my own sake."

"I think if Diana were here right now, she would tell you she is happy to take that risk for starters," Hayward said as he walked into the room. "That is just the start of this argument though. I could stand here and argue with you for an hour at least and come up with a myriad of other reasons why you should never go back to that man."

"You read his letter, Your Grace," Phoebe said, gesturing to him as he closed the distance between them. "You read what he said. Do you think once he discovers where I am he would be any less cruel

to you?”

“I’d like to see your husband try to raise a hand toward me, he wouldn’t get far,” Hayward said, crossing his arms together.

“My Lady,” Louisa’s voice prompted Phoebe to turn back to look at her maid. “Please, sit, calm yourself.” Louisa pulled her back down into the window seat, but the tears kept falling. It was as though Phoebe didn’t have control of her own body anymore.

That demon of fear that often used to cling to her shoulders was back, with its talons digging into her, and she couldn’t shake him off.

“Perhaps his Grace is right,” Louisa said with a kindly tone. “You have come so far, and a solicitor is involved now. You can’t give up yet.”

“It’s not giving up, it’s facing reality,” Phoebe said, wiping her cheeks once more.

“Some reality! It’s a horrid existence,” Hayward said so emphatically that Phoebe snapped her gaze back toward him. He dropped down to his knees in front of her then delved in his trouser pocket, beneath where the fencing padding reached his hips. He pulled out a handkerchief, embroidered with his initials in the corner, and proffered it to her. “For your tears.”

“Thank you,” she said and took the handkerchief, mopping her cheeks with them.

“Please, my Lady,” he said gently, inching closer toward her on his knees. “Do not be afraid for Diana. She is perfectly safe. She is unhurt, and I know my brother-in-law very well by now. He was my friend a long time before he married my sister. He will not let any harm come to her. He would sooner die than see that happen.”

Phoebe felt the smallest of smiles flicker through her tears.

“What a kind man he is. That kind of devotion to his wife, I think it a very rare thing to find,” she said, looking down at the handkerchief in her grasp and seeing Hayward’s initials there. She laid a finger over the *F* symbol, holding onto it.

“I used to think the same,” Hayward said, his voice soft. “I am not so certain anymore.”

She looked up at him from the handkerchief.

“What does that mean?” she asked in a whisper.

“That is a conversation for another time,” he said, holding her gaze. “What matters now is persuading you to put your trust in me a little longer. I will keep you safe in my house, and Josiah will keep Diana safe. Do not leave yet. Do not give up when we could be so close to getting you the freedom you crave. Trust me, my Lady. Trust me and stay.”

Silence followed his plea.

She didn’t know what to say for a minute. She was just thinking of his words, aware of his handkerchief in one of her hands and Louisa’s grasp in her other hand.

“I trust you,” she whispered eventually, needing him to know that. His serious face relaxed into a smile.

“There, then you will stay?”

“I will stay,” she said, warily, “but...there is something else I must ask of you in order to stay.”

“Anything,” he said. “What is it?”

“Continue with your lessons, in helping me to fight,” she pleaded with him.

“Of course.”

“And...teach Louisa too,” she asked, gesturing to her maid at her side.

“As you wish,” Hayward said, his smile making that fluttering begin again in her stomach.

Chapter 16

“Pull,” Francis said, watching on as Lady Ridlington and Louisa practiced with the pistols. Both fired at the same time, though Lady Ridlington recoiled from her pistol as it shot, making the bullet fly off in not quite the desired direction. “Woah! Well...” Francis moved to her side and took the pistol out of her hands. “I’m glad I told my gardeners not to work in the garden today.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said hurriedly, looking around the trees for where the bullet might have gone. He laughed off her apology, showing how much, he did not need it.

He had brought Lady Ridlington and Louisa into the garden and set up a target against one of the trees in order to teach them to practice shooting. Their improvement already was good, after a nearly an hour of instruction, though both of them had very different reactions to the weapons. Louisa was proving herself quite an accurate shot, though she looked down at the weapon every few minutes with something akin to horror, clearly in disbelief she was carrying the gun. Lady Ridlington could not take to the weapon at all!

“Believe me, it can take years to master this weapon,” Francis said reassuringly as he reloaded the gun. “There is nothing to apologize for,” he said softly, watching as her face flickered into the smallest of smiles.

His heart was warmed by seeing it. He had already known he would go a long way in order to see her smile. He was beginning to realize that he would do almost anything now to see it. “The first time I practiced shooting, one of the house dogs ran in the way. Fortunately, he was not injured, but I cannot tell you how frightened I was that I might have caused him harm.”

“Thank god you do not have any dogs,” Lady Ridlington said,

casting her eyes up to the sky. "If they ran in the way I am not sure I would have enough control of the weapon to ensure they were safe."

"You are getting better."

"Am I?" she asked suspiciously with raised eyebrows. "Or are you simply being kind to me?"

"Would I do that?" he asked in jest as he passed her the weapon back.

"You would," she said emphatically. "You're the kindest man I know, so I do not doubt you would say anything to make me feel better." The words made him stand a little taller, a stolen moment together whilst they were practicing with the weapons.

"Well, I like to make you feel better," he said, walking past her. He couldn't resist her, as he went by, he trailed a hand along her arm. It was brief, yet just as tantalizing, feeling the way it sent a tingle up his arm of excitement. He could see her bend her head a little down to the weapon, trying to hide the blush that crept across her cheeks because of his touch.

"Is this right?" Louisa asked him, trying to load the weapon.

"Nearly, here, like this." He took the weapon from her, showing her how to do it, then removed the shot and allowed her to try herself. "Try now, you'll get it." Once she had done it successfully, she bobbed on her toes, excited with the movement. It made him chuckle under his breath as he took a step back. "I do not think I have ever seen the two of you so happy."

"I am not sure I have ever been so," Louisa said as she lifted the weapon and pointed it at the target up ahead. "If I had been taught how to do this sooner, it might have saved me a lot of pain. Can I shoot?"

“Fire,” he said, watching as she fired the weapon. She was quite close to the bullseye, making her yelp with delight and jump up and down with the weapon in her hands.

Francis couldn’t put a finger on the emotion he was feeling as he watched her learn. It was something about the words she had said, the idea that before she had been unable to protect herself. At least now, she had a fighting chance. He turned his eyes on Lady Ridlington instead, who was staring down at her weapon, trying to get a better hold of the weapon.

“Struggling?” he asked, moving up to her side. He longed to hear the words from her lips that Louisa had said. She looked up from the weapon as he moved to stand beside her, earning her gaze.

“A lot!” she said, sighing for dramatic effect. “It is no good, I do not think I will get the hang of the weapon.”

“You just need more practice. Now, take up the weapon again.” He moved closer to her. She looked up, her eyes wide at seeing him so close, but then she lifted the weapon, pointing it toward the target. “Wait one second...” He made her pause as he lifted a hand and rearranged her grasp on the pistol. He could feel her fingers warm beneath his touch, then her arm trembled, making him hesitate and look to her. “Cold?” he asked.

“No,” she whispered softly.

“You shivered,” he said with a small smile as he lowered his voice, so that Louisa couldn’t hear them as she busily reloaded her weapon.

“I trembled,” she whispered just as quietly.

“Why?” he asked, with a knowing smile.

“Take your hand off mine and I will stop trembling,” she said, averting her eyes from his though she smiled still.

"Please tell me it is good trembling," he pleaded, earning her gaze at last.

"You know it is," she said softly. He chuckled and released her hand then walked around her.

"Lift the weapon and point it at the target." At his words, she did as he suggested, facing the target with the weapon raised in both hands. "I see your problem. You're not standing properly to absorb the recoil."

"I'm not?" she asked, not moving out of her position.

"Here," he said softly, stepping closer to her back. "Relax your shoulders a little." He placed both hands on her shoulders, urging her to soften them. She relaxed under his touch. "Now, bend your elbows a little." She did as he instructed. "Breathe deeply, relax your body, and don't panic..."

"I have a gun in my hand, if I ever wish to use this for real someday, I have a feeling I will be panicking," she said hurriedly, pulling a smile from him.

"Well, let's pray you never have to. For now, relax," he pleaded, watching as she breathed deeply with his hands still gently placed on her shoulders. "Then fire."

She pulled the trigger. Her arms bent to absorb the recoil this time, but it was still so sudden that she backed up a little, further into Francis' arms. He didn't step away. He just lowered his hands, placing them on her lower back and holding her safely against him.

I'll keep you safe, my Lady.

Lady Ridlington looked up at him in surprise, not stepping away, but her cheeks were blushing once again.

"My Lady, you weren't so far off the target that time," Louisa said,

pointing toward where the bullet had lodged in a tree. The words seemed to bring both of them to their senses. Lady Ridlington stepped away from him at the same time he did her, though she still kept her head down, clearly trying to hide her blush.

"I still cannot hit the target though," Lady Ridlington said, moving toward her maid's side. "Louisa, you are certainly the finer shot of the two of us."

"It's a long time since I've been called good at anything," Louisa said excitedly. "Can I shoot again?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder toward Francis.

"By all means," he said, gesturing toward the target. She fired another time and the bullet whole appeared very close to the center of the target.

"That's incredible!" Lady Ridlington said, lowering her weapon down by her side as she looked at the target. "I envy you, Louisa."

"The question is if you can make the shot when it counts," Francis said, taking a step forward and moving around Lady Ridlington. He purposefully gave her a wide berth, so they did not touch one another again. She noticed, for she looked sharply at him as he walked around her. "Louisa, can you do it when the pressure is high? When your life depends on it?"

"How can I tell that?" she asked as he passed her a final shot with which to load the pistol. She placed the shot in the end and pushed it down with the wadding as he had instructed.

"For one thing, you usually have to hit a moving target."

"I do not fancy practicing that!"

"Then how about making the shot whilst being distracted?" Francis asked. Behind her back, he picked a small branch off a nearby tree.

"She knows the distraction is coming now though?" Lady Ridlington asked, narrowing her eyes as she watched him pull down the branch. He placed a finger to his lips, urging her to be quiet. She smirked with mischief but stayed quiet.

"It is still a test," he promised. "Louisa, make your shot. Lady Ridlington will talk to you throughout and try to distract you."

Lady Ridlington giggled before turning her focus on Louisa and engaging her in animated conversation. Francis didn't pay too much attention to the topic, but he noticed Louisa stiffen a little, finding concentrating on the target ahead of her a little more difficult than before. He waited until Louisa was ready to pull the trigger, then he lifted the branch and carefully tickled her under her ear with the leaf.

She squealed and lowered the gun a little as she fired. Lady Ridlington laughed raucously at the sound Louisa had made as the latter turned and glared at Francis. He held up the branch innocently.

"That was sabotage, not distraction!" she complained.

"I believe the game worked though," he said with a smile and pointed at the target up ahead. Louisa turned back to see that she had actually fired the gun before she lowered it, for there was a new bullet hole in the target, not far away from the center.

"Ha! I did it anyway?"

"You did, well done," he said, dropping the branch and walking back to Lady Ridlington's side. "Did you want a go, my Lady?" he asked, addressing her.

"You're going to distract me? How?" she asked, scrunching up her nose in suspicion.

"I'm sure I could think of a way," he said, lowering his voice an

octave. She took the flirtatious meaning in his words, for she blushed all the more.

“You are trouble,” she whispered, as Louisa turned away, reloading the pistol another time.

“I know. I don’t think I can stop though.”



* * *

Francis was standing in the garden room of the house, with the walls built mostly of glass, so that he was flooded with sunlight. He was leaning one hand against the nearest window, staring out at the garden beyond. He could just see the edge of the stable yard where Lady Ridlington was standing with the groom as he prepared a horse for her to read. She was with the Andalusian again, stroking his nose softly, and clearly whispering to the horse something kind, for the horse’s nose was bent toward her.

“Are you not capable of looking away from her?” The question made Francis spin round, surprised to find Josiah in the room.

“When did you get here?” Francis asked, trying to step away from the glass toward his brother-in-law, yet finding her kept glancing back anyway out the window, toward Lady Ridlington.

“Just now. Your housekeeper let me in,” Josiah said as he held up a letter in his hands. “From Mr Preston.” He proffered it toward Francis.

“For me or Lady Ridlington?”

“For you,” Josiah said. “It is the terms of payment.”

Francis opened the letter and looked inside, finding as Josiah had described some details on the terms of payment. All looked find to Francis' eyes. At the bottom of the letter, there were a few extra words, where Mr Preston had thanked them for bringing the letter from the Viscount to him. He was certain the letter could be used as evidence of the Viscount's cruelty in court, if it came to it. There was a second note at the bottom of the letter.

"He still hasn't heard back?" Francis asked, reading over this second note. "That has been a few days. The Viscount would have undoubtedly received the paperwork by now."

"I agree with you," Josiah said, shaking his head before taking the place Francis had just vacated by the window, looking out to where Lady Ridlington was standing with the horse, preparing for her ride. "Let us hope he replies soon. Then we can put her mind at rest."

Francis looked past his brother-in-law, out to Lady Ridlington, feeling that same sense of longing he always had when he looked at her these days.

"Is she aware of it?" Josiah asked.

"Of what?" Francis asked, moving to stand beside Josiah.

"Of what you feel for her?" he asked. Francis said nothing for a minute in reply. He just continued to stare at Lady Ridlington, watching the gentle way she stroked the horse's nose as she bobbed on her toes, clearly excited and impatient to be off on her ride.

"She knows I respect her and that I..." Francis trailed off, thinking of the sheer amount of flirtation that had been between them recently.

"I'm not going to ask what the latter part of that sentence was," Josiah said with a chuckle. The words earned a harsh glare from Francis. "I just hope you know what you are doing."

“What does that mean?” Francis asked, keeping his gaze on his friend.

“It means that after all this is done, her reputation will be damaged from it. Come on, we all know it. We may all be avoiding the conversation for we know it is not a nice topic to talk of,” Josiah said, grimacing. “But her reputation will be marred a little.”

“I know,” Francis sighed with the words. “What is your point?”

“My point is that any man who wishes to marry her will have to be prepared to take that on.”

“Marry?” Francis repeated, turning his body completely away from the window as he looked toward his friend. “Who said anything about marriage!?”

“The thought hadn’t entered your mind?” Josiah asked with one risen eyebrow.

“No...no it had not!” Francis insisted. Though his eyes turned back out the window, looking for Lady Ridlington. There was a jolt in his stomach, as he watched her with the horse, thinking of Josiah’s words.

“Then think about it,” Josiah said, clapping his shoulder. “Now my delivery duties have been done today, I’m going to return home to Diana.”

“Wait, you cannot just say something like that and leave,” Francis said, turning and following Josiah out of the room.

“Can’t I?” Josiah asked with mischief in his eyes. “I have to get home. I’ll leave your thoughts of your guest to yourself.”

“Josiah?” Francis tried to call him back, but Josiah couldn’t be stopped. He headed toward the door and with the butler standing beside it, there was no chance Francis could now speak openly

about the matter at hand, not without giving away Lady Ridlington's real identity.

"You know my thoughts on this, Francis," Josiah said, hovering in the door. "Quite frankly, I have never understood your resolution not to marry."

Francis said nothing, his body just stiffened.

"I could not travel so easily with a wife at my side," he said tartly.

"Could you not?" Josiah asked. "You must simply find a wife that will like travel too. Good day, Francis." He bent his head in parting and left through the door, leaving Francis alone to his thoughts.

He did not stand still for very long. Of their own accord, his feet took him back to the garden room and then out of the door, heading across the lawn toward the stable yard. The closer he got to Lady Ridlington, he could see her looking up at him, in anticipation of his arrival.

With the Andalusian now set up with his reins and the saddle, it wasn't long before she would be setting out on her ride. Yet he didn't want to see her go just yet.

"He is beautiful, Your Grace," Lady Ridlington said as he reached her side. She was talking of the Andalusian, stroking his nose around the reins. "I do not think I have ever loved a horse as much as this one."

"He loves you more than he ever loved me too, I am certain of it," Francis said softly, watching the way the Andalusian rested his nose into her grasp, with his head turned toward her. She had ridden often of late, and after each ride, the Andalusian always seemed sad to part from her.

"Then we have a mutual affection," she said, smiling up at the horse. "Is all well, Your Grace?" Her words made Francis turn away

from the horse and gaze at her. The groom walked off, back to the stable, leaving the two of them alone.

“Well?” Francis repeated as though the word confused him.

“You do not quite seem like your usual self,” she said softly. “Maybe a little quieter than usual.”

“I am trapped in whirring thoughts.”

“What thoughts?” she asked him.

He didn’t know how to answer her. He looked around a few times but seeing the groom had gone and there was no one else nearby, he took his opportunity. He stepped toward her and took one of Lady Ridlington’s hands, lifting it to his lips and kissing the back. He held it far longer than propriety should have dictated, pressing the kiss intimately to her hand and holding her gaze.

Chapter 17

Phoebe was holding her breath as she watched Hayward kiss her hand. He wasn't letting the kiss go, holding onto it for as long as possible as he maintained the locking of their gaze.

The horse snorted beside them, impatient, almost asking what they were doing. She glanced his way before turning her eyes back to Hayward as he lowered her hand away from his lips, still holding onto her, but no longer kissing her.

"Why...did you do that?" she asked quietly, still feeling the thrill of his touch.

"Why do you think?" he whispered back to her. The words made the smallest of smiles flicker at her lips, before she remembered everything that had been in Graham's letter and the fact he had gone to the constables, claiming she had been abducted.

Hayward was in danger because he was hiding here. Whatever it was that the two of them shared...surely it could never be?

"Your Grace...I..." she stammered, uncertain what to say, especially when his hand was still in hers, making a warmth spread through her.

"Yes?" he asked, still staring at her. That gaze pierced her and made her shift to side from side with excitement.

"My Lady, all is set," a voice said, interrupting them. Hayward jumped away from her, dropping her hand, just as she turned to see the stable groom nearby. He was proffering a small bag to her, with a few snacks and a flask of water, ready for her ride.

"Thank you," she said a little shakily, taking it from him. He bowed

and stayed where he was, having no idea he had interrupted anything and clearly intending to watch her off on the horse. Cantante had hidden the moment of the kiss from the groom's view, but now the groom had walked around the horse.

Phoebe turned her gaze back to Hayward to see he was backing up even further now, looking more than a little afeared at his own actions.

"Enjoy your ride, my Lady," he said softly.

"Thank you," she said, trying to smile at him. She wanted to talk about what had just happened, and not let it go just yet. Nevertheless, the moment was gone, having slipped through her fingers like sand. "I shall see you for dinner tonight?" she asked, planning already to return earlier from her ride than she had first planned, so that she could see Hayward again and discuss *this*.

"Yes, dinner," he said distractedly, before walking away. She stepped forward, thinking of going after him, but he had turned away already and was heading back toward the house.

The horse snuffled at her side, pleading to be going. Phoebe turned and laid a hand on the horse, calming him instantly, though her gaze still lingered on Hayward's retreating figure, thinking on the words he'd uttered when she'd asked why had had kissed her hand.

Why do you think? He'd asked.



* * *

Phoebe was restless as she prepared for dinner.

"You look beautiful," Louisa said at her side as they gazed into the

mirror together.

“Thank you,” Phoebe said as Louisa offered the usual ribbon to hide the bruise at her neck. Phoebe paused before taking it, looking at the bruise that had now faded so much, there was just a small yellow tinge around her neck. “I think I’ll go without it tonight.”

“You will?” Louisa asked, with a great smile on her cheeks.

“Yes, perhaps the gold necklace would be best?” she asked. Louisa nodded with eagerness and hurried off, back to the dresser before returning with a gold chain necklace and placing it around her neck.

“There, it fits perfectly.”

Phoebe smiled as she looked down at the dress. It was not dissimilar to the gown she had attempted to wear the night she had run away from Graham. Yet this gown was pastel pink in color, with a similar deep neckline and short sleeves. She was showing off more skin than she had done in a long time, thankful that a lot of her bruises were finally healing. With the gold chain around her neck, it matched the bracelet on her wrist perfectly, and complimented the small golden clips Louisa had placed in her hair to hold up a few loose curls.

“Beautiful,” Louisa said again, bringing another smile from Phoebe.

“Thank you,” she said softly as she stepped back from the mirror, knowing in her heart why she had taken such care over what she had worn that night. It was for Hayward.

“I’m sure he’ll like it, my Lady,” Louisa said quietly. The words made Phoebe hesitate and look back to him. “Don’t play innocent,” she giggled as she ushered Phoebe toward the door of the chamber. “I saw the two of you yesterday whilst we were shooting. The air practically crackled.”

"It did not!" Phoebe complained, but Louisa appeared not to be listening, pushing her out the door anyway.

"Go enjoy your dinner, my Lady. I am sure you will enjoy your company as well as the food."

Phoebe tried to clamp her lips together to stop her smile, but it didn't work. As she left Louisa and crossed the landing, heading toward the stairs, she was very aware of the smile on her features and the restless excitement with which she was walking toward the dining room. As she descended the stairs and walked into the dining room, she found Hayward had beaten her there.

He was walking up and down the dining room, his feet taking him back and forth beside the table. He appeared equally restless, unable to settle, fidgeting and scratching the back of his head. That was until she made a sound, clearing her throat a little to show she had entered the room. His gaze snapped up to her then.

"Your Grace," she said, bobbing her usual curtsy.

"My Lady," he said, bowing to her as he held her gaze. He took a step toward her across the room, the anxiousness in the move made her breath hitch, wondering if he would kiss her hand in such a way again.

Then there was movement behind her in the corridor. She turned and moved away as the butler stepped into the room, along with the servers carrying trays ready to serve their food. The appearance of others made Hayward step away as well, moving back to the head of the table, as though he had not been about to run to her side.

"Thank you, Carling," Hayward said, nodding his head at the butler. "What have we got tonight?"

"Roasted venison, Your Grace," Carling said as other trays and plates were brought in with steaming vegetables and potatoes. As the plates were set down on the table, Phoebe slowly walked

around them, heading to her usual place beside Hayward.

He stepped forward right away, pulling out her chair in a kind way to help her sit down. She smiled at him her thanks, holding his gaze, unable to say words that had been lingering on her tongue for the last few hours, ever since she had gone on her ride earlier that day. As Hayward moved away, he dropped a hand down, brushing her arm softly. It was a brief thing, there one second, gone the next, but it brought a heat to her skin and made Phoebe's eyes follow him as he turned to his own seat.

The servers moved away, leaving the room, though the butler lingered for a while.

"Claret, Your Grace?" Carling asked, placing two glasses down on the table for them.

"Thank you, yes," Hayward said. Carling moved to the side of the room and collected a carafe of wine from a drinks cabinet before returning to the table and pouring the wine out for the two of them. "Thank you, Carling, that will be all." The dismissal was polite, but an insistent one. The butler nodded politely and then moved away, heading toward the door.

Phoebe felt her body tense as she waited for the butler to leave. As soon as he had left, she turned her head to Hayward. Neither one of them seemed interested in food, their eyes were only on each other instead.

"You kissed my hand," she said softly.

"Gentlemen often do kiss ladies' hands," he said mischievously with a small smile. She arched her eyebrows at him, showing exactly what she thought of his words.

"Not in that way!"

"Maybe not," he accepted, sitting forward in his seat and leaning

toward her. She found her own body leaning toward him, closing the distance between them. "Are you surprised? You have been flirting with me almost as much as I have with you."

"Your Grace..." she paused, closing her eyes for a minute. "This is so complicated. What even is *this*?" she asked, opening her eyes and gesturing between the two of them.

"I do not know," he said softly. "I do not have words for it." Yet he reached for her hand again, entwining their fingers together and pulling her toward him a little more. "All I know is that I seem to pin hopes on seeing you every day. I look to you in hope to see you smiling, happy, no longer afraid."

He paused with the words as Phoebe itched forward in her chair toward him.

"What is it you see when you look at me?" he asked softly. The tone was teasing, yet his expression suggested he was truly serious. She leaned toward him a little more, still clasping tightly to his hand.

"I see the best man I have ever met," she confessed. She couldn't deny it. He had rescued her when she was in a dark place, and since then had spent every day determined to make her smile and keep her safe.

His movements were suddenly anxious. He turned his chair a little more toward her and lifted her hand up to his mouth, kissing the back again, just as he had done earlier that day when she stood with Cantante. He closed his eyes this time, indulging in the kiss as he held her close to him. She leaned toward him all the more, basking in his touch and nearly falling out of her chair in her anticipation to be closer to him.

"Your Grace..." she paused, trying to hold onto the moment, yet Graham's face bled into her mind. She was married to another man. Nothing could undo that at this moment. "We should not be –"

"Do not say it," he pleaded with her, lifting his lips just a little off

her hand. "For one minute, I wish to suspend reality." His whisper was a desperate plea, making her heart ache in longing for him. He turned her hand and lifted it higher once again, this time he placed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. It was an even more intimate touch than the last, making her bite her lip.

"We cannot suspend reality forever," she whispered. Her words made him lift his lips off her skin and hang his head a little, though he clutched to her hand still all the same.

"Tell me something then," he pleaded, keeping his head down.

"Tell you what?" she asked.

"That I am not alone in this," he whispered softly. "For it's all very well telling myself that you are off limits to me, my Lady. That I should not feel what I do feel, but I do not seem to be able to stop how I feel anyway." He lifted his head this time with the words, looking at her with his eyes wide, waiting for an answer. "Can you?"

She closed her eyes, trying to block out the image of him for a minute. She knew exactly what she had felt for him. It had somehow developed without her really realizing. Each flirtatious comment, each kindness he had shown her, had made her more and more attached to him.

"No, I cannot stop it," she said, opening her eyes again. He lifted her hand another time, placing a quick kiss to her wrist before pulling her forward.

She was certain he was going to kiss her properly this time, his head bending towards her. God, she wanted it. She wanted to know what a kiss of true affection could feel like, but this was somewhere she could not go.

As he leaned toward her, she reached out and placed a hand in the center of his chest, stopping him from coming any closer. He frowned a little in surprise.

"We cannot, Your Grace," she said, whispering. "I am married to another, even though I do not wish to be."

He hung his head forward, the muscles in his jaw twitching slightly in a manner she could not quite fathom.

"Is that your only objection?" he asked, still not looking at her. "You may yet obtain your separation."

She thought of Graham's last letter. The mere thought of it made tears spring to her eyes.

"Do you think my husband will really allow it to happen?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. "I think he will go a long way to ensure I am never allowed to leave him. Besides...what of your trip to Egypt? And your travels abroad?" Her words made him sit straight, leaning away from her though he still kept one hand in hers, connecting the two of them. "You are to leave England soon, Your Grace. You have always intended to do so. And I must stay. Our lives are on different paths."

She hated saying the words, even though she knew they were the truth.

"You think you will go back to him, don't you?" he asked, holding her gaze. The tears threatened to fall all the more now, stinging her eyes. "You think it will happen."

"The lawyer made it clear that the law is not on my side," she said softly. "I might have to go back to him, even though it is the last thing I want to do."

Hayward slowly disentangled his hand from hers. Feeling it gone, she was bereft, like a part of her was missing. He turned back to his plate, looking as sad as she felt, though he didn't serve himself any food, nothing at all. He just stared at the China plate before him, those muscles in his jaw ticking.

"I am sorry," she whispered, wishing she had been able to say better words to him. Words of admiration, of devotion too, but her head would not allow her heart to say them.

"Me too," he said softly, though he kept his gaze down.

There was a tap at the door. Phoebe blinked a few times, desperately trying to stop the tears from falling. There was a handkerchief presented before her eyes, another of Hayward's as he gave it to her.

"Take it," he urged her softly. She smiled her thanks and dabbed her eyes, stopping the tears. "Come in," he called to the door.

Carling opened the door, walking back in with a letter clutched in his hands.

"Forgive me for the interruption, Your Grace," Carling said, striding across the room. "An express messenger has just delivered this, riding so fast that the horse nearly had an accident on the drive."

Phoebe lowered the handkerchief from her eyes at these words and looked up, seeing the way that Hayward took the letter. His eyes widened a little as he read the address on the letter.

"Thank you," Hayward said, nodding his head at Carling, clearly in expectation for him to leave. The butler bowed and left. As the door closed, she turned her eyes on Hayward.

"He had to leave?"

"He did," he said in reply. "Look." He turned the letter for her to see the address. Not only was Hayward's name on there, but her own, 'Lady Ridlington.' She grimaced at the sight. If the butler had paid attention, he might well have realized who she really was.

Hayward ripped into the letter, pulling it open. In the dim candlelight coming off the candles in the center of the table, it was

clearly difficult to read, for her had to lift the letter a little higher. His expression altered, the brow furrowing harder as her read.

“What is it?” Phoebe asked, feeling fear jolt in her stomach as Hayward looked up from the letter.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered quietly then presented the letter to her.

She took it quickly, reading it as fast as she could.

Dear Lady Ridlington and His Grace, the Duke of Hayward,

It is with great regret I have to inform you that the Viscount of Ridlington has this evening replied to my letter along with the paperwork requesting the separation. As we feared, he has refused to grant the separation. In fact, the paperwork was returned with not only a bitterly worded letter, laying threats at not just Lady Ridlington's door, but my own as well, but the paperwork was damaged, ripped into shreds. It does not affect our request, for I have already submitted copies to the registrar office as proof of the request of separation, yet it is testament to his feelings on this matter.

I fear the path ahead is much more difficult than we even expected. I beg you both to visit me tomorrow so we can discuss our next steps.

Yours et cetera,

Mr Norman Preston.

Phoebe lowered the letter as she looked up to face Hayward.

“What does that mean?” she asked quietly.

“It means you’re going to court.”

Chapter 18

“How good is this disguise? Truthfully?” Lady Ridlington asked as they stood in the solicitor’s office, awaiting the arrival of Mr Preston. Francis smiled as he looked at her, appraising the outfit. She was wearing the boy’s clothes again. To his mind, the breeches showed off her legs quite a lot, but he was the only one really looking at her that closely, with keen admiration.

“You are looking a little close,” she said with a giggle.

“You asked me how good the disguise is, I have to look,” he said, looking up to her with a mischievous glint in his eyes. She reached out and tapped his chin. He loved the touch, even if it was brief.

“Eyes up,” she said with a chuckle. He laughed too, looking at the way she had lifted the hat on her head, revealing her face a little more. Her brown hair had been fastened low at the back of her head, hiding the usual curls that framed her face.

Before any more words or flirtation could be exchanged between them, the door opened. Josiah walked in, followed by Mr Preston.

“Thank you for coming,” Mr Preston said as he walked toward his desk ready to take his place.

Francis pulled out a chair for Lady Ridlington to sit down in, not missing the way that Josiah was eying him with evident suspicion. Francis offered a warning glare. After the sadness of talking to Lady Ridlington over dinner the night before, and the acknowledgment that they could be separated from each other forever, he was in no mood to listen to Josiah’s jests and teasing.

“I wanted to discuss the next steps with you,” Mr Preston said as he pushed forward some paperwork on his desk.

“Now we go to court, don’t we?” Lady Ridlington asked, moving to the edge of her chair, looking rather anxious as she struggled to sit still.

“We do,” he said with a solemn nod. “With the testimonies of the bruises and the letter containing the Viscount’s own threat, we stand in good stead for court, but...” he paused, looking as uncomfortable as they all felt.

“What is it?” Francis asked, leaning forward a little in his seat.

“I know what I would argue if I was sat on the other side of the courtroom,” Mr Preston said, steeping his hands together as he sat back in his chair. “I would say that no one ever saw who delivered her bruises. They could argue she may have given herself the bruises.”

“She would grab herself around the neck!?” Francis asked in outrage, sitting forward so far that he felt Josiah clasp his shoulder, trying to pull him back in the chair.

“I know, Your Grace,” Mr Preston said, holding up his hands innocently. “It sounds absurd, but such cases have been argued before and could be argued successfully again.” He turned his eyes on Lady Ridlington. “What we need is a witness account, other than your own. Someone who can categorically say that they have seen the Viscount hurt the lady.”

She instantly hung her head, looking downward.

“There is someone else who has seen it all,” she said rather miserably. “But I cannot ask her to stand up in court.”

“What?” Josiah asked before Francis even could. Francis realized exactly who she was speaking of, covering his mouth with both hands in frustration.

“She would willingly stand up for you in court,” Francis said,

thinking of the maid back at his house that was so devoted to Lady Ridlington.

Louisa.

“I cannot do that to her,” Lady Ridlington said with surprising strength as she looked up. “She is in my service in hiding, Your Grace.” She held his gaze with the words.

He remembered very well what she had said of Louisa’s past, how she had been at the hands of a brutal man herself, and Lady Ridlington had given her the path out of that life.

“If I were to put her in court, her name would be repeated in the papers, wouldn’t it?” she said, looking between all three men.

“It could not be avoided,” Mr Preston agreed. “This is a high-profile case, of a viscount and his wife. You are also the daughter of a baron, my Lady. When this hits the courts, it will be reported in the papers.”

“I cannot risk someone reading her name in the papers,” Lady Ridlington said, shaking her head.

“My Lady, please,” Francis said, heading the desperation in his own voice as he leaned toward her. “If it is the only way to convince a court –”

“I will not risk her life in exchange for my own.” Her tone was emphatic as she held his gaze and lifted the flat cap on her head a little higher. “We stand a chance of convincing a court without her, yes?” she asked, looking at the solicitor.

“A small chance,” he accepted with a nod.

“Then I am willing to take that gamble.”

Francis looked to Josiah, seeing the same look of worry that he was

sure resided his own expression. Without Louisa's testimony in a court, the jury could well come down on the side of the Viscount, deciding there was not enough evidence that he was the cause of her bruises. The thought of seeing her go back to the Viscount disgusted Francis.

"As you wish, my Lady," Mr Preston said as he rearranged the paperwork on his desk. "Now, let us discuss the particulars of the procedure we will now go through. After that, I will appeal to the courts for a date where we can make out appearance."

"Very well," she nodded, "go on."

Francis stayed quiet throughout it all, only offering a word every now and then. He was happy to give support where it was, but any hope that had been inside of him before the felt was now slipping away.

Lady Ridlington's protection of her friend showed how kind she was, but it might have damned her to a life where she would always be married to the Viscount.



* * *

Phoebe was walking down the stairs of the solicitor's office now that their meeting was concluded, with her eyes firmly on Hayward's back. She was no fool, she could see easily how upset with her he was, but she couldn't undo that upset.

I would never exchange Louisa's safety for my own.

As they reached the bottom of the steps, Hayward and the Marquess of Dodge settled up invoices with one of the secretaries, meanwhile Phoebe walked toward the door of the office, peering out into the

street. Across the road and sat leaning against a building was a scruffy man dressed in rags.

There was something familiar about him, enough to make Phoebe squint and press her face closer toward the glass set in the door, looking toward him. It took a minute to realize where she had seen him before.

It was the thief who had attacked Hayward when they had last come to visit the solicitor's office.

"Your Grace?" she called from to him. He looked up from the paperwork he was attending to with the secretary, looking toward her.

"I'll be there in a second," he assured her, before looking back down to the paperwork, clearly trying to get it done quickly now.

She turned her head back to look out of the glass toward the road where the thief seemed to be talking at people passing him by, possibly begging for money. It continued in this way for a few minutes when a carriage pulled up at the side of the road. From the position it meant Phoebe could see both the carriage, and the thief. His eyes seemed to light up at seeing the carriage, probably thinking he had another target to try and steal from.

Phoebe turned her eyes on the carriage with worry, then realized she had seen the carriage before. There was a time when she had frequently clambered inside it, being carted to assemblies with Graham at her side, insulting what dresses she had chosen to wear, saying she was making a spectacle of both herself and him.

"Oh no..." she muttered in realization, watching as the carriage door opened and Graham stepped out. "No, no." She turned and called to the secretary. "Does Mr Preston have a meeting today with the Viscount of Ridlington?"

"No, my Lady," the secretary said, shaking his head.

“What?” the Marquess of Dodge said, moving away from the desks and coming toward her side.

“Well, he’s here!” Phoebe said, gesturing out of the window. Hayward was quick to follow, coming up to her other side so they could all look out together.

To her mind, Graham looked rather different. His hair that was usually slicked back so neatly in a ponytail was not so neat today, and he was clearly angry, his gait striding forward with purpose and his fists clenched together.

“God’s wounds!” Hayward exclaimed loudly. Another string of curses followed but she did not pay attention, her mind too fixed on the fact that Graham was walking toward the office, about to discover her. “Is there a back door out of here?” Hayward asked the secretary.

“No,” he said hurriedly, “but there is a window.”

“And a back street?” the Marquess asked.

“Yes, it leads round to the road behind, adjoining this one,” the secretary answered.

“Lady Ridlington, you must come now,” Hayward said, reaching forward and taking her arm.

“Look,” she said, pointing out again. The thief she had been watching before stepped forward, engaging Graham in conversation. To her surprise, the thief didn’t seem to be trying to rob him. They just talked. “What is that about?”

“We do not have time to find out,” Hayward said, pulling on her arm a little more. She was towed away from the door, through the downstairs office and toward the back of the building.

She felt a little numb, not able to understand what had just taken

place, so she just followed the others. The Marquess of Dodge found the window that had been discussed and slid it up. It was set high in the wall, meaning he himself had to clamber up to climb out. She expected Hayward to go next, but he didn't. Instead, he took hold of her waist and turned her toward the window. The intimate touch woke her up from her numbness, making her look up to him in surprise.

"Any other time, I would comment on this too," he said with a mischievous smile. "But we do not have time." He lifted her up toward the window. It was enough of a push to allow her to scramble through the gap and jump down the other side. Had she been wearing her gown, it would have been incredibly difficult, but the breeches allowed the free movement of her legs.

As she landed beside the Marquess on the other side, they waited for Hayward to climb through too before they hurried off toward the street. Phoebe kept glancing back a few times toward the solicitor's office, fearful that Graham would appear and follow her at any second. She was not allowed to dally though, for Hayward came back to her side, took her hand and dragged her forward. She clung tightly onto that hand as they rushed together through the back streets.

"Why is here?" the Marquess asked as they came out on a back road.

"It doesn't make sense," Phoebe said, shaking her head. "The secretary said they didn't have a meeting with him." The Marquess waved down the street, catching the eye of the coach driver who had been waiting at the junction to the next road. He pulled on the harnesses of the horses, urging them forward.

"He sent back the paperwork yesterday though, didn't he?" Hayward asked, his tone angrier than she had ever heard it before. They were still holding hands, despite the fact they were now in an open street, and could be seen by strangers, two supposed men holding onto each other. She tried to disentangle her hand, but he didn't let it happen.

“What’s your point?” the Marquess asked.

“He sent back the paperwork ripped up!” Hayward said in anger, waving his other free hand with animation. “He laid a threat at the solicitor’s door. He hasn’t gone with any kind of formality in mind. He is there intending to threaten Mr Preston, I do not doubt it. He’ll demand to know where Lady Ridlington is.”

“Speaking of which, let go of her hand before anybody else looks at you in the street,” the Marquess said, gesturing between the two of them. Hayward instantly released her hand, his expression suggesting that in his angry tirade, he had barely noticed. “Stay calm.”

“Calm? How can I be calm? If Mr Preston caves, he’ll tell where she is.”

“Mr Preston won’t do that,” the Marquess said with feeling. “He is a good man. I saw the fear in his face the day Lady Ridlington showed him that bruise around her neck. He will unequivocally deny knowing where she is.”

“God, I pray you are right,” Hayward said, running his hands through his hair.

The carriage pulled up at their side, and both Hayward and the Marquess urged her inside first. She sat on the far side of the carriage, leaning forward with her hands pressed into fists.

Hayward and the Marquess climbed in after her before the carriage set off. They were clearly still talking loudly, Hayward unable to settle his mind out of anger, whereas the Marquess of Dodge was pleading with him to be calm.

Phoebe couldn’t pay any attention to their conversation. She was startled by her body’s reaction to seeing Graham again. She had been numb at first, but now the fear was settling in. Her hands were trembling, with the fingers shaking as she tried to keep them clenched into fists. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her

knees and staring at the floor.

Having been away from Graham for a while, her heart had clung onto the hope that she might never have to see him again, might never have to fear being hurt by him again. Yet seeing him had brought back memories, thoughts that she didn't want to see. She closed her eyes, revisiting the moment he had grabbed her around the throat and torn her dress into shreds.

She wasn't aware she had made a sound until she felt the touch on her shoulder. She looked up a little, feeling Hayward holding onto her from where he sat opposite her.

"What is it?" he asked. She shook her head, unable to answer him. "Please. Tell me." He begged of her, with his voice soft.

"I was thinking of when he..." she trailed off and lifted her hand to her throat, showing what she was thinking of. She saw Hayward's face darken, the expression going from his previous anger to pure fury. "No, Your Grace. You cannot think of it too."

"How can I not?" he asked, leaning forward. He reached toward her, then looked to the Marquess who was watching the two of them, second thinking his actions and letting his arms fall limp. "He will not get anywhere near you again. You can depend on that."

"It is not within your power. It is not a promise you can make," she said, hanging her head.

"Yes, it is." The vow made her look up again, seeing the sincerity in his gaze. There was something there she hadn't seen before. A sort of determination that was new.

They all fell quiet, with nothing more to say. The ride back to Hayward's estate was silent, with not a sound uttered between any of them. When the carriage pulled up outside of the estate, Phoebe hovered in the carriage, uncertain how to get inside without being seen by the staff.

The coach driver clearly knew their secret by now, having had to carry her to and from the solicitor's office, but she had seen Hayward speaking to the driver, pleading for his silence in this matter, and he had given his firm promise. The rest of the staff though, didn't yet know.

"Stay here for a moment," Hayward pleaded with her as he stepped out of the carriage, looking toward the house. The Marquess descended too. They hovered by the door of the carriage for a minute, discussing how to get her inside when there was a commotion coming from inside of the house.

"My Lord! Your Grace!" It was Mrs Goodman's voice. They all turned their heads to the door at the panicked tones, watching as she ran out of the house with a note being waved madly in her hands. She faltered when she got near to the carriage, her eyes slipping toward Phoebe in the carriage.

Phoebe grimaced, realizing now another person would have a few more hints as to the fact she was not who she claimed to be.

"Mrs Goodman, please, this has to stay secret," Hayward said, motioning toward Phoebe. "Could you get the lady inside without being seen?"

"Yes...of course," she said, nodding. "I can take her in through the side entrance. The other staff are at luncheon." She turned her head toward the Marquess and proffered the letter in her hand forward. "My Lord. You must see this. It was delivered only fifteen minutes ago, with a lot of urgency by one of your own messengers."

The Marquess took the note from her hands as Phoebe moved to the door of the carriage, trying to find out what was afoot. He read it quickly before looking up, connecting his gaze to Hayward's.

"It's from Diana. Something has happened. She begs me to come home as soon as possible."

Chapter 19

“To think, ten minutes ago you were the one telling me to be calm,” Francis said when he was back in the carriage. Lady Ridlington had been taken into the house by Mrs Goodman, and he and Josiah had both climbed back into the carriage, heading toward his and Dian’s house.

“You think I can be calm now?” Josiah asked, brandishing the parchment in his hand.

“No, not in the slightest,” Francis said, shaking his head, not feeling remotely calm himself, though he felt at least able to wear a little more of a calm façade now, for the sake of his friend. “She’ll be fine, I am sure of it,” he said, clapping his friend on the shoulder, wishing he could believe his words completely.

They fell quiet as the carriage rumbled along the road, heading back toward the Marquess’ house. When they arrived in the right road, Josiah leaned forward, looking out of the window.

“Oh my god...” he muttered. The words made Francis lean forward in fear, looking out of the window too. His jaw fell slack at the sight.

The front of Josiah’s house was in carnage. The door was hanging off the hinges and where clean white marble steps leading up the porch to the front door usually were, they were marred with a chair that was upside down, and a coat stand that had been flung across them, with pelisses and jackets splayed on the floor.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt with the horses whinnying loudly in objection, though Josiah hadn’t really waited until the carriage had stopped. The door was open, and he had jumped down with Francis hot on his heels.

“Diana?” Francis heard himself scream his sister’s name in fear, not quite able to believe the sight that was before him. Beside the doorway, Josiah’s butler was sat down, with his head hanging between his knees.

“What has happened?” Josiah said, striding forward as the butler lifted his head.

“The Viscount of Ridlington,” the butler said, his voice strained. “The constables have been sent for.”

“Lift your head higher,” Francis pleaded with the butler as he reached his side. The butler did as asked, revealing a bruise growing across his forehead.

“God have mercy!” Josiah spat the words. “Did the Viscount do that?”

“Yes, my Lord,” the butler said. “I refused to let him in. I cannot apologize enough. He got past me anyway.”

“It is not your fault,” Francis said with feeling.

“Diana? Diana!” Josiah roared her name and ran up the steps toward his front door, jumping over the fallen chair and coat stand. Francis followed, chucking the chair out of the way as they ran into the house.

His blood turned cold as he looked around, seeing the interior had been ransacked. There was not a table still in place, nor a painting that was straight on the wall. Francis peered into the sitting room beside him, seeing chairs overturned and even Diana’s harp tipped over in anger.

“Diana?” Josiah shouted again, running between the rooms downstairs.

“Josiah?” she answered at last, appearing at the top of the stairs.

Francis was first one to reach the staircase, bounding up the steps toward her.

“Diana, are you all right?” Francis asked as quickly as he could, reaching out and taking one of her arms as he checked her all over.

“I am fine,” she said hurriedly, though there were tears in her eyes. “He did not hurt me.”

Josiah reached them and headed straight for Diana, taking her out of Francis’ grasp. He embraced his wife, holding her tightly to him. Diana buried her head in her husband’s chest, his embrace allowing those tears to fall. Francis ached to watch his sister’s pain.

The Viscount of Ridlington had caused this.

“What happened, Diana?” Josiah said, as he kissed her forehead, urging her to look up at him through her tears.

“The V-Viscount. He arrived here this morning, seconds after you left,” she said, her words stammering through her tears.

“He must have been watching the house, waiting for you to leave,” Francis said, walking in a small circle as he bunched his hands against his temple, thinking hard. He now understood what had happened that morning. After the Viscount had ransacked Diana’s house, he had gone to Mr Preston’s office. Francis didn’t doubt he’d been just as violent there.

“He knocked out our poor butler,” Diana said, “stepped over him to get into the house. The footmen tried to restrain him, but it did little use.” Francis winced, remembering the footmen all too well, they were boys really, still lads with not much muscle on them. They wouldn’t have been able to stand a chance. “He found me with the harp, demanding to know where Lady Ridlington was. When I said I didn’t know, he...” she broke off as she gasped with her tears.

Josiah embraced her again, holding her tight and kissing her. The sight of the comfort made Francis turn away and rest his arms on the banister above the stairs, leaning over it. More than once had he considered taking Lady Ridlington in his arms in such a way that very morning, but he was not permitted to.

“He pushed over the harp, and then he began to destroy the place. He chased me through the house, saying he would ruin everything if I did not tell him where she was,” Diana said, her voice still stammered with tears. Josiah and Francis glanced at once another, the fear evident in that one look. “I didn’t tell him.”

“What made him leave?” Josiah asked.

“Our gardener,” she said softly, revealing a small smile. “He is such a big man; I do not think even the Viscount was willing to take him on. The footmen fetched him, and he threw the Viscount away from me, demanding he leave. The Viscount ran away with his tail between his legs then.”

“Good,” Francis found himself saying, but it was not enough. The Viscount would have to pay for what he had done now, not only to Lady Ridlington, but to his sister too.

I cannot let this carry on.

“That blunderbuss,” Josiah said, followed by a string of other curses.

“Josiah!” Diana admonished him.

“Can you blame me?” he asked, his eyes wide. “This has to stop. Now.”

“Agreed,” Francis said, standing up off the banister. “We tell the constables what happened. Have him charged for this.”

“They will still not arrest him, not if he says he had reason to

suspect Lady Ridlington was here,” Josiah said, not releasing Diana.

“I know, but we make the case anyway,” Francis said, looking around the house. That day could have gone much worse. The Viscount could have taken his anger out on Diana rather than her house. It had been a close call indeed. “You two should come away from the house. Move in with me for now.”

“What?” Diana asked, looking up.

“It is not safe here,” Francis said, gesturing to the mess in the house. “There is nothing to stop the Viscount watching this house and forcing his way in again.”

“Agreed,” Josiah said. “It is not safe.”

“Come to mine. Stay there for a few days.”

“Are you certain?” Josiah asked.

“I have never been more certain,” Francis said with feeling. “Pack your things. We’ll leave for mine as soon as possible.”



* * *

Francis helped Diana into the carriage, seeing that she had stopped crying, even though the tears still lingered in her eyes. She paused for a second, holding onto his hand tighter and staring at him.

“It is my fault, isn’t it?” she asked in a whisper.

“What makes you say that?”

"I'm the one who goaded him before," she said, "when he last came."

"This is not your fault, Diana," Francis said with feeling. "The only person we can blame for this is Lord Ridlington. In you go. Let's get you somewhere safe." He urged her into the carriage before stepping back and looking up and down the road.

Nearby, Josiah was overseeing the footman fasten their bags to the carriage, whilst the butler watched on, cradling the bruise on his face.

"You need a physician," Josiah said softly to the butler and patted him on the shoulder. "Go to one. Take as much time off as you need."

"Thank you, my Lord," the butler said, though he did not look comforted. "Maybe I will attend some boxing lessons as well. I never want to feel that helpless again when a man goes after the Marchioness."

"You are a good man," Josiah said, clapping him another time before he walked forward, toward Francis. "I never want to live a day as dark as this again," he said, so only Francis could hear him.

"Agreed," he said with a nod, as he turned his gaze to looking up and down the road.

"Is something wrong?" Josiah asked, following his gaze.

"I am not sure," Francis said, continuing with his watch. "I thought I saw someone watching us at the end of the road."

"They could have just been curious because of all this mess. Nosey neighbors certainly are a thing round here," Josiah said tiredly, shaking his head.

"Maybe," Francis said, chewing his lip, but he wasn't convinced.

“Let’s get into the carriage. Quick.”

They both clambered in and soon the carriage was heading off, but it wasn’t long before Francis couldn’t bear to watch his sister in Josiah’s arms across the carriage on the other side. Diana was resting her head on her husband’s shoulder with Josiah’s arm around her, holding tightly to him. The intimacy, the trust there, it was all something Francis had felt recently, but he was not permitted to indulge in such public displays.

He turned his gaze out of the window, desperate to find something else to look at, when he realized that there was a carriage behind them on the road. It was at some distance away from them, perhaps just heading in a similar direction, yet remembering that feeling of being watched at Josiah’s house, Francis watched the carriage all the more.

When the road bent road, it afforded him a better view of the carriage following, until he realized that it was gaining ground.

“Stop!” Francis called and clattered on the roof. The carriage came to a rather clumsy halt in the middle of the road.

“What is it?” Josiah called after Francis, but he didn’t answer. He flung open the door and jumped down, moving toward the back of the carriage to look behind them. Other riders in the road rode around the carriage, moving on. Even passersby walking along the paths stopped and looked at him, wondering what he was doing. He had his focus on the carriage that had been following them.

He did not miss the way the driver looked up, his eyes finding Francis’. The driver seemed to stiffen before pulling on the horses’ reigns and urging the carriage to make a turn off the road, onto a new lane. Francis followed them with his gaze for a minute.

“What is wrong?” Josiah’s voice made Francis turn away, seeing his brother-in-law had jumped down from the carriage.

“We were being followed,” Francis said.

"You are sure?" Josiah asked, stepping away.

"No, not certain," Francis said, shaking his head, "but I do not want to take chances."

He urged Josiah back into the carriage with a wave of his hand and closed the door behind him, before moving up to the front of the carriage, climbing up onto the footboard and taking the seat beside the coach driver.

"Your Grace!" the driver said, turning to look at him in surprise.

"Apologies," Francis said, "I wish to keep a better eye on the road, so I will join you up here. Also, we are going to take a different route home."

"As you like, Your Grace. Which way would you like to go?"

"The most complicated and ridiculous way you can think of." He could see the driver's eyebrows lift in surprise. He wasn't going to give the chance for anyone to follow them, just in case he had been right.



* * *

"Oh, I wish you had told me the truth sooner, my Lady," Mrs Goodman said as she bustled around Phoebe yet another time. "How about another cup of tea? Or another slice of cake?"

"Thank you, Mrs Goodman, you are very kind," she smiled at the sweet-tempered housekeeper, seeing the way that Louisa was sitting nearby laughing under her breath.

As soon as Mrs Goodman had helped Phoebe sneak back into the

house, Phoebe felt compelled to reveal the truth to the housekeeper. It seemed to be the elder lady's prerogative to now fix any hurt Phoebe had with as much tea and cake as possible.

"What about lemon and poppy seed cake?" Mrs Goodman said as she poured her another cup of tea. "I think there is some in the kitchen."

"My Lady will be gaining weight if we keep feeding her up like this," Louisa said with a laugh.

"You have already filled me up with all this honey cake," Phoebe said, gesturing down to the tray. "You have been very kind, Mrs Goodman, truly I do not need anymore."

"Well, you give me a shout if you need anything else," she said with a kind smile. "I'll be back soon. I'll check what cook is making for dinner. Do you have a favorite dish, my Lady?"

Phoebe had to hold in a laugh as the housekeeper hovered in the doorway, looking hopefully toward her.

"Erm...roast chicken?" she said.

"Perfect, I'll see to it." The door was closed as the housekeeper hurried off, leaving Phoebe to look at Louisa with a smile.

"I think lovely Mrs Goodman thinks all ails can be healed with food," Louisa said laughing, rearranging the teacups on the tray to help tidy up.

"If only it were true," Phoebe said, pushing away the plate on which her cake had been before turning her eyes back to the window.

"You have heard the phrase a watched pot never boils, my Lady, have you not?" Louisa's words pulled Phoebe's focus away from the driveway. "You can keep looking longingly out of the window, but

Hayward will not return any quicker.”

“I know,” Phoebe said, standing up from her chair and moving around the room. Now she was back in one of her usual gowns, she was feeling a little more constricted. There had been a freedom to wearing the man’s clothes, giving her the ability to hide in plain sight, away from Graham’s eyes. She oddly did not feel so safe back wearing a dress.

Despite Louisa’s words, Phoebe’s feet took her toward the window, looking out in expectation of seeing the carriage return.

“I wonder what has happened,” she said quietly, remembering seeing Graham that morning. She frowned as she thought of the moment Graham had spoken to the thief. Perhaps the thief had simply been begging for money? Yet she knew Graham well enough to know he would have brushed the thief instantly off. Whatever their conversation had been, it had not been short.

“Well, your look of longing appears to have worked after all,” Louisa said from across the room.

“What?” Phoebe asked, before focusing on the driveway ahead again. The carriage was returning, only it was clear even from this distance that Hayward was not coming back alone, for there were bags and trunks fastened to the rear of the carriage.

Phoebe pushed away from the window and hurried across the room, heading out of the door and into the entrance hall. The front door was locked tightly in place, but she turned them in a hurried manner before flinging the door open and stumbling outside, her feet scattering stones as she waited for the carriage to come to a stop.

The door of the carriage was flung open, revealing as Phoebe had suspected that Hayward was not alone. Lady Dodge was there, along with the Marquess who descended first and then offered a hand to his wife to help her down.

“What has happened?” Phoebe asked with panic, stepping forward the moment she could see her friend had been crying. Lady Dodge’s eyes were red, and the handkerchief clutched in her hands told all.

“Thank goodness you are all right,” Lady Dodge said, walking toward her.

“Me? I am fine. What has happened to you?” Phoebe cried as she reached out to take her friend’s hands. It was quickly changed into an embrace by Lady Dodge who held her tightly to her.

“It was worth it,” she said softly. “Just to make sure he never can find you.”

“Goodness, please, tell me what happened,” Phoebe said, still clutching to Lady Dodge as she peered over her friend’s shoulder, looking toward Hayward as he climbed down from the carriage. Surprisingly, he had been up at the footboard beside the driver.

“Before going to see Mr Preston, your husband paid a visit to Diana,” Francis explained with an angry countenance. “He must have been watching the house, waiting for Josiah to go, before he ransacked the place. Threatening to tear it apart until Diana told him where you were.”

“No...” Phoebe said, feeling breathless as she pulled back from Lady Dodge’s embrace to look her in the eye. “Did he hurt you?” she asked, her voice so quiet that she herself struggled to hear it.

“No,” Lady Dodge said, shaking her head. “I...” she paused, swallowing. “I think he was tempted to, but he held himself back. He wouldn’t hurt someone else’s wife.”

But he came close.

The thought burned Phoebe as though her skin were on fire with the guilt.

“I cannot risk you anymore,” Phoebe said implacably.

“No, do not say it –”

“I have to go back.”

Chapter 20

“What did you say?” Francis said, looking up from where he had been overseeing the unpacking of his sister’s bags. He turned his eyes to where Diana was clasping Lady Ridlington’s hands.

“No, no,” Diana said, shaking her head. “You cannot give up now.”

“He ransacked your house; he may have hurt you. How can I continue to risk that?” Lady Ridlington said, stepping back, as though going to release Diana’s hands, but she did not let her. Francis found his feet taking him forward, going to follow her. Josiah shook his head and went to oversee the bags himself, clearly deciding he had no part in the conversation. Francis was not so prepared to let this go.

“You cannot go back to him now,” he said, stepping up to Lady Ridlington’s side and earning her panicked gaze.

“Look at what happened to your sister,” she said with feeling, gesturing toward Diana. “What kind of friend would I be if I continued to let her risk so much for me?”

“What kind of friend would I be if I let you give up now?” Diana exclaimed, much louder than Lady Ridlington had done. “No, you are not going back, you cannot.”

“I...” Lady Ridlington trailed off, looking between the two of them. “I have to. What if he comes after you again?”

Francis couldn’t hear another word of this. He had to put the matter to bed, once and for all.

“Diana and Josiah are going to stay here for a while,” he said loudly, stopping Lady Ridlington from making anymore objections.

“Here, they will be safe. He doesn’t know they are here, and he has no need to. You are mad if you think after all this, I am going to let you go back to a man like that now.”

“You won’t?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I won’t,” he said, staring at her so hard that it was clearly difficult for her to look away. “Quite frankly, if you make any attempt to go back to him, I’ll merely go after him to stop him from ever hurting you again.”

“Francis!” Diana said in surprise, looking at him. “You would hurt him? You could end up in prison for such a thing.”

“What do I care about that?” Francis said, looking to his sister. “If it will keep her safe, then I will quite happily take the sacrifice.”

“You would do that?” Lady Ridlington asked, earning his gaze.

“I would,” he promised her. “So, I will hear no more words about this, my Lady. You are not going back to him, or I will simply have to follow you. Now, let’s get everyone inside.” He took control of the situation, turned and beckoned the bags to be taken in by the footmen, walking in ahead of the others.

He’d made up his mind and was willing to take the sacrifice, fully meaning his words. If Lady Ridlington went back to the Viscount, Francis would take it into his own hands to make sure the Viscount couldn’t ever hurt her.



* * *

“I think I will retire early for the night,” Diana said as she stood to her feet, looking around the room as she left her game of cards with

Lady Ridlington. "It has been an eventful day; I'll be better after some sleep."

"Sleep well," Lady Ridlington said as she packed away the cards, offering a smile.

Francis watched them both from where he sat by the fire, reading a book beside Josiah who had another book in his hands. To Francis' mind, neither of them were doing very well at reading, they kept just looking toward the ladies as they played cards.

"I'll retire with you too," Josiah said, closing the book.

"Not taking in a word?" Francis asked with a knowing smile.

"Not one," Josiah said, shaking his head as he stood to his feet. Francis knew very well what was on his mind, stopping him from reading freely. It was fear for the woman he cared so much about.

At this thought, Francis' eyes flicked back to Lady Ridlington as she left the cards in the middle of the table and stood to her feet.

"Good night," Francis bid to his sister and brother-in-law as they left the room, leaving him alone with Lady Ridlington. She moved forward, taking the chair beside him that had just been vacated by Josiah and sitting on the very edge, wringing her hands together. "Finding yourself unable to relax?"

"A little," she confessed as she stared at the fire beside him. With the sun long gone and the night sky beyond the windows, it was the fire light and the few candles in the room that lit her before him, casting yellow hues across her face, and making her blue eyes almost silver. "I keep thinking of what you were saying earlier today."

"Yes?" he asked, closing the cover of his book, now having lost all interest in it completely.

“Did you mean what you said?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the fireplace between them as the flames crackled and made the wood snap.

“The part about going after the Viscount?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I meant every word.” This time, his words urged her to look up at him. She didn’t say anything for a minute, she just continued to look at him, apparently searching for something to say. “I have startled you,” he summarized after a moment.

“You have no idea how much,” she said with a disbelieving headshake. “You are prepared to be punished in a court of law and go to prison, maybe worse, just to see me safe?”

“Yes,” he said, without hesitation.

“But...you would be exchanging your life for mine, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, and?” he said, still not seeing a problem with the situation. She lifted her hands up to her face, covering her mouth though she held his gaze. “Which part about this surprises you? The fact that I am willing to be violent towards the Viscount, or the fact that I am willing to make that sacrifice?”

“The sacrifice!” she said with surprising animation, flinging her hands down by her side. Her manner was abruptly so alight that Francis moved to the edge of his seat, inching a little closer toward her. “No one has ever said such a thing to me before. That you would be willing to do that...” She broke off and covered her mouth yet again with both hands.

Francis moved out of his seat, glancing toward the door out of fear that his family would return, or the butler would walk in, but the door remained firmly closed. With that freedom, he knelt down in front of her, softly taking her wrists and trying to pull them away

from her face.

“Please, listen to me, Lady R...” He stopped. He was tired of calling her by her husband’s name. It suggested she still belonged to the Viscount, something that Francis couldn’t stand. “Phoebe.” He used her first name. The surprise made her hands a little limper, allowing him to pull away her hands so he could see her face fully. “Can I call you that?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, eagerly with a nod.

“Quite frankly, I never expected to hear myself willing to make such a sacrifice either.” His words brought a small smile to her face. From the grasp he had on her wrists, he altered it, until their palms slid together, and he entwined her fingers with his own. “Now, there is not a doubt in my mind. I will not let him hurt you again, come what may.”

“I do not know what I did to earn your kindness,” she said with her eyes glistening, on the verge of tears.

“You should never have to earn kindness, Phoebe. That is not the way the world works,” he said, his tone so strong it surprised himself, despite the quietness of it. “What a world you have been in to think that kindness is a rare thing?”

He loosened one of his hands in hers and lifted it slowly up to her, knowing that she might push him away at any moment, knowing as well that what he wanted to do was forbidden, yet unable to stop himself anyway. He pulled one of the locks of hair that was dangling down by her cheek back, and tucked it behind her ear, using the action to allow him to caress her cheek with the back of his hand. She leaned into the touch a little, her eyes fluttering closed as she indulged in it.

“We shouldn’t be so close,” she whispered after a minute, though she still stayed there, holding his touch.

“Would you like me to retreat?” he asked, knowing he would do

anything that she asked of him.

“No,” she said, opening her eyes. “Don’t go.”

It was the only encouragement he needed. He used his soft hold on her cheek to pull her forward, just an inch, testing the waters. When she still didn’t ask him to stop but instead allowed her eyes to close another time, he was bold and leaned toward her. As he kissed her, he felt as though things had slid into place.

The tingle that traveled through him as well as the heat made it plain that this was where he should be, with Phoebe’s hand clutching to his, palm to palm, as they kissed. It was a simple kiss, with just their lips pressing together, but it was what he had been imagining for so long that it felt like the most tantalizing of things to share with her.

When they parted from one another, he watched her bite her lip, tempting him to kiss her again, but he had taken enough liberties for one night with another man’s wife. He rested his forehead against hers, maintaining the intimacy a little longer.

“I know what you said at dinner last night,” he said quietly, so low that he struggled to hear his own voice above the crackle of the fire nearby, “but it is not so easy just to stop what I feel. I cannot stay away from you.”

Her lips flickered into the smallest of smiles as she made no further objection. He longed to kiss her, but restrained himself, lifting his forehead off hers a little and resting back on his knees. He looked down at their joint hands for a minute, seeing he could maintain the intimacy between them for a short while longer. He lifted her clasped hand and turned it over, until he could place another one of those kisses to the inside of her wrist. She gasped at his touch, prompting him to look at her, seeing the swell of her chest as she took a sharp breath and the coloring of her cheeks.

“You respond as though you have never been kissed before,” he said with a whisper and a smile.

"I haven't," she said quietly. There was something of relief to him to hear those words. The Viscount had never kissed her. It made him clasp to her hand with both of his, holding tightly to her. For all the cruelty the Viscount had shown her, at least there was something he had not taken from her, a kiss.

"Do something for me, Phoebe," he said, keeping his eyes on her. Now he had broken the boundary in using her Christian name, he had no intention of referring to her by her husband's name, only her own. "No more talk of going back to him. Please? You have said it twice now."

"Only to protect you all."

"I know, but I still do not wish to hear it again. Please?"

"I promise," she said softly as he lifted his hand and kissed it another time, unable to stop kissing her now that he had crossed the boundary. "I should go to bed." She gestured toward the door.

Francis stood to his feet and stepped back, allowing her to go. She hesitated a step from him before turning back and raising herself on her toes. He held his own breath, wondering what she was doing when he saw her turn her lips to his cheek and kiss him there, briefly.

"It seems you and I are going to struggle to stop doing that now," he said in a tease, prompting her to laugh as she lowered herself back down to her toes.

"I think you could be right. Good night, Your Grace," she said with a smile.

"Good night, Phoebe."

He kept his eyes on her, watching as she walked across the room. She hesitated in the doorway for a second, waving good night to him, before she disappeared and let the door close behind her.

The moment she was gone, Francis ran both of his hands through his hair, in a mixture of frustration in the situation and the thrill of finally having kissed Phoebe. He walked around in a small circle, letting his gaze dance across the different things in the room, the paintings, the books, even the leather-bound atlas that was placed on a table nearby.

He walked toward the atlas and opened it up at a page he had marked long ago. He had added a piece of paper as a bookmark, his cursive handwriting plotting out the trip he was to make when he next travelled. He was to go through Constantinople, then on toward Cairo in Egypt. He had planned it for so long, it had just been a question of delaying it now that he had a responsibility to hide Phoebe.

Josiah's words came back to him from the day before. *You must simply find a wife that will like travel too.* Even when Francis had first met Phoebe, she had been thrilled when he talked of Egypt. Since then, they had discussed travel more than once. She loved hearing of where he had been and when he had even mentioned once her possibly travelling herself after she had her separation from the Viscount confirmed, she had been very excited by the idea.

Was it possible that maybe Phoebe could be that woman? The one to accompany Francis on all his trips abroad, and love it as much as he did? It would mean going back on his vow to never marry. Yet Phoebe made him want to break that vow.

"She is not free to marry," he muttered to himself. He closed the atlas and turned around in the room, when something beyond the window caught his eye. It was sudden, a flash of something that was then gone.

He hurried toward the glass, peering outside, waiting when he saw it again. Something was moving across the lawn, around the house, and it certainly wasn't an animal.

There is an intruder on the estate.

Chapter 21

Francis ran even before his mind had caught up to what his eyes had seen. He hurried out of the sitting room, into the main hallway, before unlocking the front door and flinging it open, scrambling across the pebbled driveway to try and see who it was that was in his garden. The moon was out, but it kept slipping between the clouds, making it increasingly difficult to see in the shadows just who it was.

At first, Francis stayed still, looking back and forth, thinking his eyes might have deceived him. With all that was happening, he wouldn't have blamed himself for an overactive imagination.

Then something moved far to the left of him, and he flicked his head toward it. There was a figure, jumping out from a hiding place beside a pillar on the driveway. It ran off, heading toward the lawn.

"You! Stop!" Francis cried before urging his body to sprint forward. It struggled across the pebbled driveway at first, until he followed the figure through the cobbled stable yard, where the firmer ground beneath his feet made it easier to move, then they stretched out together across the lawn.

Francis looked back just once to the house, realizing that when he had seen the figure from the sitting room window, there was no door on that side of the house. It was possible the figure was just there to keep watch instead.

Phoebe and I were seen together.

The thought made him run harder, chasing the figure.

They hit the cambering bank at the end of the grass, getting closer and closer toward the trees. Once in the wood, Francis knew it

would be difficult to catch someone in that darkness. It made him pause and scramble at the earth, looking for a weapon. He found a few branches that had fallen from the trees and rolled down the bank. Snatching them up, he threw them into the air, trying to stall the intruder.

One stick missed entirely, but the second managed to hit the back of his leg, tripping him up a little. The figure fell forward, onto his knees before he looked back toward Francis. With the moon hidden behind the clouds, Francis couldn't see the figure's face, but his eyes traced what he thought was ponytail at the back of the intruder's head.

Francis grew nearer, but he was not close enough to stop the stranger from jumping to his feet and setting off into the wood.

"Stop where you are!" Francis roared the words as he ran between the trees.

He didn't know how long he ran in the end, chasing after the intruder, but it had to be sometime, for his legs were burning and he was struggling to keep breathing at a level pace. The figure ahead leapt over fallen logs, forcing Francis to do the same, then dodged certain trees, creating a confusing path in his effort to lose Francis. Fortunately, Francis appeared to be the most athletic of the two and he was gaining ground, gradually.

The moon came out at last from between clouds, shining white light through the branches, yet still Francis could not see the figure clearly. He was in the shadows between the trees, making it nigh on impossible to see who it was.

Is it Lord Ridlington? Is it someone who works for him? Or is it some passing thief trying his luck? Fearing that his first thought could be right, Francis felt his speed increase.

He got so close to the intruder that he reached out, a hair's breadth away from catching the man's jacket when he dodged to the side, evading Francis' capture. He was forced to circle a large oak tree

another way.

“I said stop!” Francis bellowed to the man. Yet it did little use.

He gained ground again. This time when he reached out, he made sure he wasn't going to miss. He tackled the man to the earth.

They both fell amongst the tree roots and soil, the damp earth splattering around them with the recent rain creating puddles. The intruder cried out in pain, but Francis did not let up. He adjusted his hold, pinning the man down to the earth, ready to turn him over to see who he was.

Nearby there was a squawk, of an animal, maybe a barn owl. It was so abrupt and sharp that Francis lifted his head in surprise, turning to see what it could be. It was a brief distraction, but it was enough for the man beneath him to get the advantage.

Francis was not aware the intruder had grabbed a stone from the earth below them, not until he could see the flint-like rock, silver in the moonlight coming toward him. He tried to dodge it but was too slow. It struck across his forehead, dazing him instantly.

He wobbled on his knees before feeling another blow to his chest, knocking him to the ground on his back as the world turned dizzy. Francis blinked a few times, trying to focus, yet the dizziness just grew worse. After a second, a silhouette appeared in his view. Whoever the intruder was, his face was still in the shadows, meaning Francis couldn't make out his face.

The silhouette lifted his hand with the rock, intending to strike Francis.

There was another squawk. It was the barn owl again, only this time it flew between the trees, possibly protecting young, frightened by all this commotion in the middle of the night. It flew straight at the intruder, forcing him to retreat with fear. The silhouette dropped the rock and ran, disappearing through the trees.

Francis pulled at the earth around him, trying his best to move to his knees and then stand, but once on his knees the world grew dizzy and then turned black. The last thing he could remember was the feeling of the wet mud against his cheek.



* * *

Phoebe walked into the dining room with a lightness to her body. Since the kiss she had shared with Hayward the night before, the smile had never been out of her face. To the point that she had even dreamt of him, thinking of that kiss, until she woke up and traced her lips where he had kissed her.

So impatient to see him, she hurried into the dining room, then her feet fell still behind her, seeing that at the head of the table where he should have been sitting was empty.

“You’re up,” Lady Dodge said, calling Phoebe’s attention. She was sat nearby, opposite her husband. “How did you sleep?”

“Very well, thank you,” Phoebe answered honestly before moving forward to her chair, though she kept glancing back to Hayward’s chair every now and then. “And you?”

“Very well,” Lady Dodge said, emphasizing the words. “It feels considerably safer here than it did back home.”

“We do not know where he is,” the Marquess said.

“I’m sorry?” Phoebe asked, turning her head away from the chair to see the Marquess had a small smile in his features, clearly having caught her staring longingly at the empty chair.

“We do not know where he is.” He pointed to the chair. “You were

staring at it so intently that I presumed that was going to be your next question.”

“Yes, thank you,” Phoebe said a little nervously as she took her seat, aware that Lady Dodge was now looking at her with some interest. Before Lady Dodge could comment on the stare, Carling walked into the room, bringing fresh tea and coffee for the table.

“Ah, perhaps you can help us, Carling,” the Marquess said. “Do you know where His Grace has gone this morning? He is usually the first one for breakfast.”

“I do not know, my Lord,” Carling said, frowning as he turned to look at the head of the table.

“He has not attended some business meeting?” Lady Dodge asked, looking up from her teacup. “Gone to town to see Mr Preston, perhaps?”

“No, the carriage has not been sent for this morning,” Carling said with a shake of his head.

“Well, perhaps he is having a lie-in,” the Marquess said, though he appeared as discomfited as Phoebe felt.

“That is not my brother,” Lady Dodge said, sitting back from her food, abruptly having no more interest in it. “Even when we were children Francis was always the first one of us all to be up and about.”

“You have not seen him at all?” Phoebe asked Carling.

“No, my Lady.”

She felt the panic then. She moved forward in the chair, so sharply that she nearly fell off.

“Do not worry,” the Marquess said, offering a hand to help her back

into the chair. "I am sure he is fine. He has perhaps taken an early walk across the estate. Carling, could you ascertain from Hayward's valet where he went? He may be able to offer us more ideas."

"Of course, my Lord." Carlin bowed after placing the teapot down on the table and hurried out of the room.

"It's most unlike him not to leave a message though," Lady Dodge said, leaning forward in the chair. Phoebe sat back in the chair, so worried by his absence that she balled her hands together, until she created small crescent ridges from her nails in her skin. "Don't you worry, dearest," Lady Dodge said, pulling Phoebe's attention away. "We will find him. Now, there is a hearty breakfast here, it's time you ate something."

"I am not really that hungry," Phoebe said, turning her attention toward Hayward's empty chair.

"Nonsense," Lady Dodge said and lifted the teapot off the table, filling her cup for her. "You must eat something." Lady Dodge added food to her plate afterwards, that Phoebe picked at for a few minutes, trying to eat something though her stomach would not settle. Her body was too tense to allow herself to relax and eat calmly.

"You look very worried," the Marquess said as he looked up from a newspaper that he had placed on the table beside his plate.

"Are you not?" Phoebe asked. "Enough odd things have happened recently."

"I do not wish to overact," the Marquess said, returning his focus to the newspaper. "Though I rather suspect Hayward will be pleased to hear you care so much to worry in such a way for him."

Phoebe did not miss the tease. She lifted her eyes to the Marquess as he hid his laughter in his newspaper.

“Josiah,” Lady Dodge said with a warning tone. “You are making my friend ill at ease.”

“Nonsense,” he said with a chuckle. “I have seen them together enough this last week or so to be able to see what is happening.”

“Do ignore him,” Lady Dodge said, waving a hand in dismissal toward him. “He is quite convinced that you have fallen in love with my brother, and he cannot resist teasing you about the idea.”

“In love!?” Phoebe asked. The statement struck her so hard that she was not looking where she put her hand as she reached for the teacup. Rather than taking hold of it, she sent it flying, knocking tea everywhere. “Oh, I am so sorry.”

“See, Josiah? That was your fault,” Lady Dodge said, waving a disapproving finger at him as they hurried to mop up the spilt tea with napkins off the table.

“How was that my fault?” Josiah was still laughing. “It was her own shock that someone has figured out her secret.”

“I do not have a secret,” Phoebe said, looking up at him with wet napkins in her hands.

“You have told him you love him then?” the Marquess asked, peering over the newspaper at her.

“What? No. I mean...I am not...” she trailed off and bit her lip, thinking on the words.

“Ignore him,” Lady Dodge said, in clear disapproval of her husband. “He is simply trying to cause mischief.”

Yet the thought lingered. It was true that she had never cared for a man before quite the way she did Hayward, but was it possible that she was in love with him? She didn’t know. She had never been in love before.

Footsteps came closer, signaling there was someone about to enter the dining room. Phoebe turned her head toward it, in hope of it being Hayward, but Carling walked in instead.

“Hoping it was someone else?” the Marquess asked her, to which Lady Dodge tapped her husband’s hand across the table, quieting him.

“I have just spoken to Hayward’s valet and he tells me His Grace did not call for him this morning and ring the bell. Neither did he call for him last night.” The butler’s words made Phoebe stiffen in her seat. “We have just now checked his room, but he is not there, and there is no sign his bed has been slept in.”

There was quiet in the room for a minute as they all looked between each other.

“Now are we allowed to be concerned?” Phoebe asked, being the first to break the silence.



* * *

“Go riding, that will make you feel better,” Phoebe scoffed, repeating the words that the Marquess had said to her. At this moment, she didn’t think anything would make her feel better.

In the last hour, a search of the entire house had been made, looking for Hayward. It had discovered nothing, though one of the footmen had come forward saying that before he retired the night before, he found the front door unlocked and had locked it before he retired for the night.

That had prompted a new search of the gardens, though the Marquess wouldn’t let Phoebe help, insisting that she was already

worried enough. He had suggested that she go riding in the woods to relieve her worries, whilst they searched the gardens and asked the groundskeeper if there had been any sign of Hayward in the woods too. The Marquess was also sending messengers to places Hayward liked to visit in town, to see if he had managed to leave the house after all.

"I do not think my heart will be settled, Cantante," Phoebe whispered to the Andalusian as she stroked his nose.

He snorted in agreement with her before she pulled herself up into the saddle. She took one last longing look into the garden where the search was happening before turning her head toward the woods and urging Cantante toward the trees. She figured at least in her ride she could help with the search, even if most people didn't seem to think Hayward would have gone wandering in the woods at night.

At first, she rode slowly, but soon the anxiety and fear for Hayward made her ride faster, until she was galloping between the trees, having to leap over roots and dodge low-hanging branches, in the efforts to ride smoothly without stopping. The horse's ears were pricked in delight, happy at the freedom they had together, as they delved deeper and deeper into the woods.

Soon, they had ridden so far that they were nearing the border of where the trees met the estate wall that backed onto nearby streets in the outskirts of London. She was about to turn Cantante back round when he took on a mind of his own.

He reared his head and whinnied into the air.

"What is it? Cantante?" she called to him. He lowered his nose back down, bringing her to a sharp stop and snorted at the earth. "Move, Cantante," she urged, digging her heels in, but he flatly refused to go anywhere. She pulled harshly on the reins, tugging his head back up. "What is wrong?" she asked with worry.

Rather than the horse taking the path she had intended for him to

take, back down through the woods, he took her further along, parallel to the border wall.

“You have in mind where you would like to go?” she asked with an amused smirk at the horse taking control. A short while later, the horse stopped and whinnied again, drawing Phoebe’s eyes beyond his head and toward the earth up ahead. There was someone lying on the earth, half face down on their side, with blood on their head. It only took a moment for Phoebe to realize who it was.

The Duke!

Chapter 22

“No...No. Your Grace!” Phoebe scrambled down off Cantante so quickly that she slipped more than once in the damp mud to get her bearings. She ran over to Hayward’s side, dropping down to him and brushing the hair back from his forehead, trying to see his face clearly.

There was dried blood on his temple and his eyes were firmly closed.

“Your Grace, please wake up.” She pleaded with him as she prodded him in the shoulder, desperate to rouse him. He made no noise, none at all. With panic and a trembling hand, she lifted her fingers toward his neck, looking for a pulse. “Please, do not be dead. I do not know what I will do if you are.”

Her prayer was answered though and she found his heartbeat, strong and firm, without a flutter to it.

“Thank god,” she turned her eyes to the sky with the words before looking back down at him. “Your Grace, wake up!” she said insistently, desperately. There was a flicker in his face, something moving around his eyes that suggested he had heard her.

She looped her arm around his, knowing she needed to lift his face off the mud. Using her hold on him, she levered him round, until he was no longer on his side, but on his back, with his face turned up the sky. More muscles were twitching in his face.

Kneeling beside him, she leaned down and cupped his face, trying to brush back more of the hair that had been matted in the dry blood.

“Can you hear me?” she begged him for an answer, feeling how

strained her voice was with fear.

"I...can hear you," he whispered at last, his eyes flickering open. Seeing him awake did something to her. She felt tears of worry and relief prick her eyes.

"Can you move?" she asked as he blinked a few times before turning his eyes on her.

"I don't know," he said, then winced, trying to lift a hand to his head. She stopped his hand midair before he could touch the wound.

"Best not touch it," she said, gently taking his hand and pulling it away. "What happened to you?"

"That is a story," he said, his voice much weaker than normal.

"What are you doing out here alone?" she said with insistence and fear.

"I'm fine, Phoebe," he assured her.

"You are not fine!" she said, looking around the trees and trying to think of a way to get him back to the house. She could leave him and ride back for help, but the thought of parting from his side was too much to bear. These woods were also so thick that she might struggle to trace her way back to his exact spot. "We need to get you to a physician."

"Well, I won't argue with that."

"Is this really the time for jests?"

"I have to say something to lighten the mood," he said softly. She looked down to see a small smile appear in his features before it faltered.

“Oh god,” she said, leaning toward him, unable to keep her hands off him as she took his cheek and tried to wipe some of the wet mud off his skin. “I thought you were...” she trailed off, not able to say the words.

“I know,” he said, holding her gaze. “For a minute last night when I tried to crawl through the mud, I thought I was too.” Those words made the tears begin to fall down her cheeks. One of his hands lifted high, reaching toward her, as he took hold of her cheek and brushed away the tears. She didn’t care he was smearing some of the mud across her face, she still leaned into his touch.

“I won’t let that happen,” she said, slowly changing her position beside him. “You’re going to stand, Your Grace. I’m going to get you back to the house somehow.”

“I can’t walk alone. I tried,” he said as he lowered his hand away.

“Then you will lean on me,” she said with meaning and moved to her feet before leaning down and taking his arm. “Take my arm and move to your feet, Your Grace.”

“It seems rather odd that in a situation like this, you are still calling me Your Grace,” he said, his eyebrows lifted.

“Are you dazed from the blow to your head?” Phoebe asked with a frown.

“You could say that,” he agreed as he took her arm. “Call me Francis, Phoebe.”

“But...I can’t.”

“You can,” he said, his voice still quiet and lacking its usual strength. “Call me Francis, please.”

“Very well,” she said, taking a tighter hold of his arm. “Francis, please try to stand.”

He did as she asked, using her arm to help lever himself up, but the moment he was standing he wobbled, completely unable to stay stable. Her arms went up around him, taking his waist to try and steady him. It was difficult, for he was much taller than her, but she managed to make it work. Until he looked down at her in surprise.

“What?” she asked.

“Any other time I would make a jest about this,” he said with a small smile.

“You really are dazed,” she said, finding she was unable to smile out of fear for him. “This way.” She released him with one arm, keeping the first around him and steering him through the woods, as he leaned across her shoulders. He stumbled a few times, before managing to get some kind of footing and heading with her toward the horse.

As she stopped beside Cantante, she felt Hayward shake his head.

“I can’t get up there.”

“Why not?” she asked. “Please?”

“If I get up there, I’ll just fall off,” he said, turning his gaze through the woods. “I am sorry, Phoebe. Can you support me walking through the woods?”

“Of course, I will,” she said, pulling him forward again. She left the horse where it was, expecting to come back for him later, but Cantante seemed to take the cue and followed behind them anyway, with his nose turned down in their direction.

The two of them made slow progress, both quiet with Phoebe occasionally struggling when Hayward faltered slightly on his feet.

“I thought I wouldn’t be found,” he said after a while. The words made Phoebe’s arm that was around him tighten.

"I have been so worried all morning," she said, still feeling the tremble in her other hand, though she tried her best to hide it.

"Thank you, Phoebe."

"What for?" she asked. The two of them came to a pause between the trees, both getting their balance. Hayward reached out and took hold of a tree nearby with his other hand, using that to steady his weight to and take some of the pressure off of Phoebe.

"For this," he said, "all of it."

"You can't stop walking now," she said, watching as he leaned off her completely and rested against the tree.

"It's too hard."

"No! You cannot stop here." She followed him as he leaned on the tree, resting his back against it. "Your Grace, please –"

"No more Your Grace," he said again, pleadingly as he turned his eyes on her. She reached up toward him, gently taking his chin and angling it down to her.

"Francis," her use of his name made him breathe deeply within her grasp. "You have to keep moving."

He said nothing for a minute though he leaned a little further down toward her.

"You may have saved me," he said, whispering.

"Not if you don't keep walking!" she said, yet he kept leaning down toward her anyway. She didn't realize right away what he was going for, not until she felt his lips against hers in a gentle kiss.

All her objections faltered as she thought only of that kiss. It was different to the kiss the night before, just as soft, yet this one made

her heart ache, for now he was in danger, and she stood the risk of not knowing such a kiss again.

“What was that for?” she asked as she parted from him a little, looking up and connecting their gaze.

“Just in case I don’t have the chance to do that another time,” he said with a sad smile. The words made her breath hitch.

“No, you will. You’re going to keep moving, we’ll get you to a physician, you will recover and...”

“And there will be more kisses?” he said with a dazed smile.

“Yes! Now please, move,” she begged of him. He nodded, then gritted his teeth as he moved off the tree, showing how painful it was for him to keep walking.

They retook their old position, with her arm around his waist and one of his across her shoulders, letting her steer him through the trees, with Cantante following on closely behind.

When they eventually got closer to the lawn, Phoebe felt a smile of hope, for she could see people in the distance. In the gardens, the Marquess was walking around, with Mrs Goodman close at his side, both deep in worried conversation.

“Mrs Goodman!” Phoebe shouted. “Lord Dodge!” Their heads whipped around in her direction, trying to see through the last of the trees. “We need a physician!” she called these last words as they stumbled out of the tree line together.

Lord Dodge was the first to move. He ran forward, leaving Mrs Goodman behind him as Hayward came into sight. Phoebe managed to get Hayward through the trees before together they faltered.

“No, Francis,” she pleaded with him to stand straight, but he dropped down at her side, onto his knees.

“God have mercy!” Lord Dodge’s words were spat with a kind of fury as he reached them and dropped down to his own knees in front of Hayward too, using the stance to analyze the wound. “What happened?”

“I was hit,” Hayward said. “I will tell you all later.” He veered a little to the side, clearly exhausted from their walk.

“Mrs Goodman!” Lord Dodge whipped his head round as he took Hayward’s shoulders, keeping him upwards. “Fetch a physician now!”

Mrs Goodman in the distance nodded and ran back toward the house.

“God, they hit you hard,” Lord Dodge said as he stood to his feet again, still with a hand on Hayward’s shoulder. Phoebe placed a hand on Hayward’s other shoulder, unable to stop touching him. He lifted a hand and placed it over hers on his shoulder, apparently needing that touch just as much. “Who was it?”

“I...don’t know. I can’t be sure.” Though Hayward looked up to Phoebe with the words.

“What?” she asked, looking at him.

“It may have been Lord Ridlington.”



* * *

The concussion was prolonged and painful. Francis was watched over by a physician and his assistant for some hours, repeatedly having to lift a chamber pot in order to be sick before the evening came round and his stomach eventually settled. He still had a

headache, but the thumping pain had begun to retreat, leaving him to lay in the bed exhausted, with his head back on the pillows as Josiah stood by his bed, accosting the physician with lots of questions.

“How bad was it?” Josiah asked.

“He’ll live.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“It’s the question you wanted to ask,” the physician said knowingly. Francis smiled a little and reset himself on the pillows, lifting himself up a little higher.

“Francis, rest,” Josiah said, leaning toward him.

“I am, but I am not on my deathbed just yet,” he said with feeling, watching as his brother-in-law raised both eyebrows.

“You should see how pale you are before you say that.”

Francis ignored him and turned his eyes on the physician.

“How long until I am recovered?” he asked.

“Well, how are you feeling now, Your Grace?” the physician asked as he proffered a small glass bottle forward with a brown liquid in it. Francis screwed up his nose in rejection at first. “It is a tonic. For the pain.” Hearing that, Francis was only too happy to take the bottle and gulp down the liquid.

“I do not feel sick anymore,” Francis said, “but the headache is still there.”

“You will be dizzy for a day or so more I should think, and you may have a lingering headache for a few days afterwards, along with a swelling to your temple. You were lucky, Your Grace.”

“Lucky?” Francis asked, not feeling remotely lucky in his current situation.

“The blood was more from a cut to your skin than the impact the rock made. It could have been a lot worse,” the physician said uncomfortably, shifting between his feet.

“You mean I could be dead,” Francis said, aware that Josiah breathed in deeply at the words, standing on his other side.

“I am saying...you are lucky,” the physician said again, choosing his original wording. Francis nodded slowly then regretted it from the pain in his skull and held tightly to it. “I shall come back in the morning. Now, it is important that you get some rest tonight, Your Grace.” The physician passed the empty glass bottle into his assistant’s hands, and they packed up for the night, taking their medicine bag with them.

“Thank you,” Josiah said heartily to the two men as they stepped out of the door before closing it behind them. The moment they were gone, Josiah turned his eyes on Francis through the candlelight, with many questions lingering there. “Can you remember what happened to you?”

“Yes,” Francis said, knowing he would have to tell the tale some time. “First, some water.”

Josiah nodded and crossed the room, pulling out a carafe of water and pouring a glass that he dutifully passed to Francis. He sipped slowly, unwilling to push his stomach too far just yet, watching as Josiah moved a chair to his bedside and sat down.

“I am glad to see you are doing better,” Josiah said.

“Worried about me?”

“Yes, and I can give Lady Ridlington the good news,” Josiah said, sitting back in his chair. “She is so worried about you that she will

not sit still. Diana has tried distracting her. Cards, music, books, conversation, anything! Nothing will do. She just continues to pace up and down, wringing her hands together, asking after you.”

Francis smiled a little, remembering the feeling that had swelled in his breast when he had opened his eyes to find Phoebe above him in the woods. She had saved him.

He knew how he felt about her now. It had been clear in that moment, so clear that when stumbling through the woods with her, he had been unable to stop himself from kissing her, needing that intimacy.

I am in love with her.

“Put her mind at rest, please,” Francis said, gesturing to the door.

“In a minute,” Josiah said, holding up a hand. “I first want to know why you were in the woods in the middle of the night.”

“Very well,” Francis said, placing the glass of water down on a bedside table and resting back on the pillows. “There was an intruder in the gardens. I went out to see who it was, started chasing them through the forest.”

“You said you thought it might have been Lord Ridlington,” Josiah said, his face stern. “Are you certain? It is one hell of an accusation to make.”

“No, I am not remotely certain,” Francis said, sighing. “I couldn’t see clearly. I could only see a man with his hair tied at the nape of his neck.”

“It is how he wears his hair, but it is not enough.”

“Agreed,” Francis said. “It could have just been a thief chancing his luck. Then he hit me when I got too close.”

Josiah shifted in his seat for a minute, scratching his face in obvious frustration before sitting forward in the seat.

“So, we do not know,” Josiah said in summary. “Without knowing who it was, we can’t really go to the constables either.”

“I know,” Francis agreed, lifting a hand to the bandage over his head the covered the cut. “There is one other thing know.”

“What is that?” Josiah asked.

“I was already down when the intruder raised the rock again. He was going to hit me another time, had it not been for a barn owl flying past that startled him.”

“Wait...hit you again? Then he...”

“Yes,” Francis said, struggling with the words. “I think they intended on killing me.”

Chapter 23

“Francis?” Phoebe said tentatively as she opened the door. She felt bold indeed walking into a Duke’s chamber so unaccompanied, even more so when she used his first name, but after all that had passed, formalities seemed absurd, and Josiah had assured her that Francis wanted to see her. Alone.

“Phoebe?” he said her name, urging her further into the room.

Phoebe closed the door behind her and rushed inside. Dawn light was beginning to break through the windows, marking the second day since the attack on Francis. He was sat up in bed, with his normal color much returned, though his hair was a little mussed from sleep. His blue eyes were alert as they found her across the chamber and a smile pinged into place.

“Thank the lord,” she said as she ran across the room toward him. She didn’t hesitate from reaching out to him, as he did her. He moved to the edge of the bed, still half covered by his shirt and the bedsheets, then flung his arms around her. Enveloped in his arms, she wrapped her own arms around his neck, clinging tightly onto him. “You gave me the fright of my life.”

“Me? Hardly my doing, was it?” he said with a chuckle from where his face was buried in the crook of her neck.

“You were the one that went running off in the woods at night by yourself! What did you think would happen? A pleasant midnight stroll?”

“Fair point,” he said with a chuckle and sat back a little. She perched on the bed beside him, releasing him a little, though his arms never left her waist, so that she was cradled against him.

“How are you feeling? I kept asking Lord Dodge last night how you were, but all he would say is that you were improving,” she asked with worry. She had even accosted the physician before he had left that same day, determined to know something more. The physician had assured her that Francis would make a full recovery, but it was not the same as hearing it from Francis’ own lips.

“My head is still sore, but the sickness is long past, and I am not as dizzy as I was before, though the physician tells me the dizziness might continue for a little longer yet,” Francis said, still not taking his arms away from her.

“Your Grace, you are holding onto me rather tightly,” she said with a smile, loving the feeling of those arms around her.

“I think it’s because I’m scared if I’ll let go, I’ll lose you,” he said in a whisper. “Thank god you found me, Phoebe. Heaven knows what would have happened if I had stayed out in the woods for much longer. And why are you calling me ‘Your Grace’ again?” She chuckled at the mock outrage he employed, delighted to see that he was doing so much better he could actually make a jest. “I am Francis, that is my name.”

“Very well, Francis,” she said softly. “What happened to you?” She lifted a hand and hovered it over where the bandage used to be on his head. It had now been removed to show a bruise that was beginning to heal and a cut that was sealing itself back together.

“I wish I knew,” he said softly. “Phoebe, there is something you should know though –”

There was a quick rap at the door.

“Damn,” Francis muttered. “I’m going to have to release you now.”

She giggled and stepped up from the bed, out of his arms. She crossed the room a little, putting distance between the two of them and straightening her skirt.

"Enter!" Francis called to the door. It was duly opened by Lord Dodge, who was followed in by a Constable. "Ah, Constable, thank you for coming."

"Your Grace. My name is Constable Jenkins. I was so sorry to hear of your attack." The Constable hurried through the room and took a chair by Francis' bed, sitting down with a small notebook he placed on his knee. "Lord Dodge has given me an account of what has happened, but if you can handle it, I would like to hear from you what happened."

"Of course." As Francis went into telling the tale, Phoebe could feel eyes upon her. She turned to see Lord Dodge was still standing in the doorway, looking at her with a smirk upon his lips.

"What is it?" She mouthed the words for only him to see. He seemed to laugh under his breath and shake his head, before taking a few more steps into the room, passing close by her so he could whisper.

"You're blushing, my Lady," he said with a small laugh as he crossed the room closer to Francis. Phoebe smiled and hung her head, trying to hide that blush. It seemed little use in trying to hide what was between her and Francis, her own tendency to blush was betraying it!

"Are there any details you can share about this man that attacked you?" the Constable asked, drawing Phoebe's attention back toward Francis. He paused before replying and looked toward her. "Your Grace?" the Constable prompted him on.

"If I may," Francis said, gesturing to the notebook and pencil in the Constable's hand. They were duly passed over and instead of replying by words, Francis scribbled something down before passing the book back to the Constable. Phoebe stepped forward, intent on seeing what he had written down, but Lord Dodge stepped in the way, blocking her sight.

This is a little odd, Phoebe thought as she walked around him again,

but the Constable promptly closed the notebook so she couldn't see at all.

"This morning, Your Grace, myself and my junior attended your gamekeeper as he did a sweep of the perimeter wall of the estate," the Constable said, leaning forward with a grave countenance. "We found what seemed to be scuff marks in the wall, and torn clothes too. It would appear that whoever did attack you, climbed in and out of the estate by this point in the wall. It is a little shorter here than elsewhere, so it would be easier for him than tackling the locked gate."

"Yes, I suspected as much," Francis said, lifting a hand and scratching his chin.

"Have you gathered any evidence that suggests it was a thief?" Lord Dodge addressed his question to the Constable.

"None so far. If he did take anything, he did not drop it, and nothing can be found to be missing from the estate. It is possible he took something from the garden, of course, but that may be more difficult to tell. Can you think of any other reason why there could be an intruder on the estate?"

Phoebe was waiting for the words to come, for both Francis and Lord Dodge glanced her way, but they said nothing.

"No, I cannot think of a single reason," Francis said, making Phoebe frown. She couldn't understand why he wouldn't mention the Viscount. After all, it was possible it could have been him. Graham had stormed into Lord and Lady Dodge's house and searched it himself! Was it so odd to think he could be willing to do the same to this house?

Well, he might not know Lord and Lady Dodge have come here.

"There is something else we found during our search," the Constable said, shaking Phoebe out of her thoughts. "The rock that was used to strike you, Your Grace. It is blood-stained and was

discarded on the ground close to where you were attacked. It seems he took the closest weapon to hand he could find to attack you.”

“Not a planned attack then?” Lord Dodge said.

“No, I think not. Whoever struck you, did it because you were chasing them.” The Constable stood to his feet, showing that the conversation was coming to a close. “I would recommend urging some of your men to patrol the grounds every now and then. If your intruder had an ulterior motive beside theft, then they could come back again. At least then we’ll know what they want. I will leave you in peace to recover now.”

“Thank you,” Francis said with a smile and the Constable bowed before hurrying out of the room.

For a minute, silence descended in the room as Lord Dodge moved to the window, looking out of it to watch the Constable’s retreat, and Francis rubbed his hands across his face in stress.

Phoebe couldn’t bear the silence. She had to ask the question that was burning in her mind, making her palms sweat with fear.

“Was it the Viscount?” she asked, making both men snap their gazes toward her.

“I saw nothing to indicate it could be him.” Francis assured her with a smile. She felt the tension soften from her shoulders and she breathed a sigh of relief.

He has not found me after all.



“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Josiah asked as Francis started walking toward the door.

“Completely,” Francis said, hesitating on his feet a little as the dizziness swept in. “I am one hundred percent well.”

“Tell your feet that, because they look like they’re trying to plait themselves together.”

Francis planted his feet onto the rug beneath him, attempting to stand perfectly still.

“That better?” he said, gesturing to his body.

“A little,” Josiah winced with the words.

Francis turned a little to see his reflection in the mirror. He was tired of staying in bed, and with the red clover and violet tonic solution the physician had given him, his headache was gone, and he did not see the point in laying still anymore. He’d been in bed for two days straight and was determined to join Phoebe and his family for dinner, even if he had to sit in one chair and barely move all evening.

“I will be fine,” Francis said with conviction as he adjusted his jacket and cravat one last time. “Though I might borrow your arm to walk downstairs with.”

“I’m giving it to you now before you fall flat on your face.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Oh, if only you could see yourself from where I’m standing,” Josiah said with exasperation as he reached Francis’ side and helped him to walk out of the room. “Before we reach dinner, tell me this. Why were you so keen to hide the fact from Lady Ridlington that your attacker may have been the Viscount?”

"Firstly, we do not know that for sure. He is hardly the only man in London to wear his hair in a ponytail," Francis said as they walked through the corridor, toward the landing above the stairs.

"Agreed, but it is a suspicion. You lied to her and said there was nothing to suspect it was him."

"Sadly, I did." Francis grimaced, hating the idea that he had lied to Phoebe about anything. "How many times now have we seen Phoebe say that she intends to go back to the Viscount in order to keep us all safe?"

"Too many times," Josiah agreed with a sigh.

"Exactly." Francis pulled Josiah to a stop above the stairs, still clinging onto his arm for the dizziness was a little stronger than he thought it might have been. "What do you think she would have done if I had told her that the Viscount could have been the man that tried to kill me?"

"Ah..." Josiah paused, his jaw slackening in realization. "She would have packed her bags and gone back to him instantly, just to keep you safe."

"See?" Francis said as the two of them set off again, walking down the stairs much slower than he could usually do. "You know it as well as I. Quite frankly, I am not going to let that happen. I will keep her here where she is safe, far away from that monster. There is another thing as well that bothers me."

"Which is?"

"If it were the Viscount, why has he not come for her already?" Francis asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "He could have done. He could have stormed the door and demanded I send her back, but he hasn't yet."

"Maybe he's biding his time?" Josiah said, lowering his voice to a

whisper as they walked through the entrance hall and got closer to the dining room. "Waiting for the right moment to come?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it was not him at all that hit me, and he was just a thief after all."

"Maybe," Josiah said, though he chewed the side of his mouth and looked distinctly unconvinced. "So, you're going to keep this a secret from her?"

"Sadly, yes," Francis whispered as they hovered on their side of the closed door to the dining room. "I cannot lose her now."

Josiah's lips flickered into a smile.

"At last!"

"At last, what?"

"Are you going to admit now that you and Lady Ridlington share something?"

"Josiah, please be quiet," Francis said, turning his attention back to the closed door.

"You were tortuous when I started courting Diana. Can I expect a courtship between you and Lady Ridlington soon?"

"She's married!"

"I mean after she obtains her divorce."

"And how is that ever to happen?" Francis said, feeling a darkness swelling in his chest with his own words. "You heard what Mr Preston said in our last meeting. Without Louisa's testimony, Phoebe stands little chance of having her divorce. What fool would I be to hope that it could happen?"

Josiah offered a sad sort of smile as he released Francis' arm and clapped him on the shoulder in comfort.

"Stranger things have happened."

"Are you trying to console me? Because there doesn't seem much room for hope right now," Francis said, his whisper growing more and more agitated.

"No? You called her Phoebe. Not Lady Ridlington, but Phoebe." Josiah's words made Francis stiffen, not having realized he had done it in front of his brother-in-law. "I know you quite well by now, Francis. I don't think you are going to let that woman slip away from you very easily."

Josiah reached for the door, showing the conversation was at an end and swung it open to reveal Diana and Phoebe walking around the table, about to take their places for dinner. When Francis' eyes settled on Phoebe, he realized how right his brother-in-law was.

I do not want to let her go.

That same sense of love swelled within him again. He did love her. Dearly and hopelessly. That thought made another take hold of him.

I have to tell her I love her.

Chapter 24

When the shot went off, it echoed around the trees, making Phoebe jump away and cover her ears.

“My Lady, something tells me you are not suited for shooting,” Louisa said with a laugh as she reset the pistol.

“I do not like them at all,” Phoebe said with feeling. “I’d much rather return to the fencing.” She turned her eyes back to the house with longing, craving that Francis would be well enough to teach her some more. As it was, though he had managed to rouse himself for dinner the night before, the physician had arrived that morning to warn him against too much exertion, and he was forced to spend most of the day sitting, much to his irritation.

“Has my brother taught you to fence too?” Lady Dodge said from where she was sitting nearby on a low-lying wall that surrounded the section of garden where they were standing.

“He has,” Phoebe said, walking away from Louisa and moving toward her friend to sit beside her on the wall. “He thought it would be good that I have a way to defend myself, and I quite agreed. Though *this...*” Phoebe paused and gestured to Louisa who was finishing reloading the pistol. “It is something I cannot take to.”

“I can,” Louisa said with a smile as she lifted the pistol another time and aimed at the target, firing. The sound made both Phoebe and Lady Dodge jump, though Louisa jumped for joy when she hit the center of the target.

“I have said it before and I will say it again, I admire you greatly, Louisa,” Lady Dodge said with a chuckle. “I wish I had the strength of character to wield a weapon like that.”

“Do you?” Phoebe asked, looking at her friend with curiosity.

“I imagine a feeling of safety comes with it,” Lady Dodge said smiling before turning her gaze on Phoebe. “I will admit that when your husband came storming into my house, I would have been quite glad to have found a weapon close to hand.”

“I know what you mean,” Phoebe said with a sigh, thinking back to all his rages and every time he had hurt her. She found her fingers tarrying around her neck where he had left his last bruise, that had now completely healed, with not a trace of purplish skin left. “When your brother first gave me a rapier to carry, I felt rather ridiculous. Then after a while, it was as though it had become an extension of me, a way in which to defend myself from the unknown. I’d much rather be doing that than shooting.” There was a difference to her between the weapons. A sword was stopping a blow, but to fire a gunshot could end up being lethal!

“I’ll stick to this,” Louisa said again and reloaded the weapon. “Come now, my Lady. It is your turn.”

“What? Oh no, I do not need to do any more.”

“But you must!” Louisa insisted, proffering the pistol to her. “This is why we’re doing this, to stay protected. You must practice as Hayward says.”

Phoebe sighed and glanced back to the house again. She had a feeling that if Francis were here with her now, she would feel more than happy to say yes, just to feel the way he would place his hands on her shoulders and on her hands as they held the pistol, showing her what to do and whispering close to her ear. Just the memory of it made her smile.

“Yes, you must practice. It is imperative!” Lady Dodge declared and jumped to her feet, taking Phoebe’s arm and dragging her to where Louisa stood.

“You are rather insistent, you know,” Phoebe said with a chuckle.

“Rather like your brother.”

“Ha! I have been told that many times,” Lady Dodge said as she urged Phoebe to take Louisa’s place in front of the target.

“Right, my Lady, here we are,” Louisa said, passing her the pistol. “Remember what Hayward said, and shoot.”

Phoebe breathed a few times, trying to stay calm and collect herself. Yet as she lifted her hands, her fingers began to tremble.

“You’re shaking, my Lady,” Louisa said softly from where she stood at Phoebe’s shoulder. Lady Dodge was by Phoebe’s other shoulder and extended a hand to her, touching her arm in reassurance.

“All is well, my friend,” she said in a reassuring whisper.

“I know, it is just...” Phoebe trailed off, aware that the barrel of the gun was shaking more and more in her hands. As she continued to stare at the target, she was thinking why she was doing this: it was so that if it were ever needed, she could protect herself from Graham, but...could she actually ever bring herself to shoot him?

She blinked a few times at the target up ahead. In her mind’s eye, the target morphed, until it was no longer something made of white and black cloth pinned on bound straw, but it was a human instead. It was Graham and he was walking toward her, with that red hair slicked back into a tight ponytail and those eyes flaming with hatred and anger in her direction.

She couldn’t imagine what words he would say, but she could all too easily picture how he would reach out for her. He’d probably go for her neck first, pinning her to one of the trees that were behind them, blocking her in so she couldn’t make her escape, no matter how much she tried to flee him.

Her hands shook around the pistol even more.

"You can do this, my Lady," Louisa said, encouraging her to take the shot.

"N-no, I cannot," Phoebe found the words slipping from her mouth. She released the pistol and dropped it to the earth beneath them. Louisa hurried to pick it up as Phoebe felt the prickle of tears.

"My friend, what is it?" Lady Dodge said, taking her hand and locking their fingers together, probably in an attempt to stop the trembling.

"I do not know if I could ever really do it," Phoebe said breathlessly. Before she was really aware of it happening, the tears had started to leak out of her eyes and trickle down her cheeks. Louisa fished in her pocket for a handkerchief and presented it to her. Phoebe rushed to dry the tears, yet fresh ones followed, making her work futile.

"You mean...shoot your husband?" Lady Dodge said. "Do not think of it in that way! This is only if the worst should ever happen. If you need to protect yourself, that way you can."

"I know, it is just..." Phoebe trailed off, stammering through her tears. "I do not know if I could do it. Cause anyone that harm."

"It is not about harm, my Lady. It is about defense," Louisa said, placing a hand on Phoebe's shoulder and urging her to look round. "Maybe sometimes life is about being bold, doing things that we never thought ourselves capable of doing."

"Do you think?" Phoebe asked quietly.

"Oh yes," Louisa said heartily with a firm nod. "Where would I be now if I hadn't been bold and taken that risk to run off with you? I could still be back where I used to work with *that man* breathing down my neck." She affected a shudder that Phoebe rather suspected was completely real.

“Being bold?” Phoebe repeated the words. “Is that all it is, do you think?”

“I think so. It’s taking a risk. It’s a gamble. But think of what the other option could be?” Louisa said as Phoebe mopped up fresh tears.

She closed her eyes for a second. In that brief second, she could have been back in her chamber with Graham’s hand at her throat and her dress being torn. The terror that ripped through her body at the idea made her eyes shoot open again.

“Would you like another go, my Lady?” Louisa said, proffering the pistol another time.

Phoebe nodded wordlessly and took the pistol. Louisa and Lady Dodge took a step back, giving her the space that she needed to take the shot. This time when she lined the pistol up with the center of the target, she managed to keep the anger at Graham’s grasp around her throat firmly in her mind.

She fired.

She closed her eyes as she made the shot and as the sound echoed around them, she opened them again to see that the bullet landed slightly off the middle of the target, but it was far from the worst shot she had ever made. Lady Dodge and Louisa promptly cheered at the accomplishment she had made as she lowered the pistol another time and mopped up fresh tears.

About being bold. She repeated these words to herself many times that afternoon as they practiced more and more with the weapons. She just had to pray that it would never come to the moment where she had to make a choice of whether to fire or not.



* * *

“See? I am fine. Barely dizzy at all now,” Francis said as he walked around the drawing room. Despite his declaration, Josiah followed him regardless. “God’s wounds, you are looking at me like I am a China doll about to fall over and crack at any second.”

“Do you not remember the physician telling you to be careful?” Josiah said, following him around the piano and Hepplewhite chairs regardless.

“I do, but I am doing so much better. Not dizzy at all, see?” he said, doing a quick circle on the spot. Josiah folded his arms, frowning as he watched him. “In fact...” Francis reached for a bowl of oranges that Mrs Goodman had set out on the coffee table that morning. “I’ll prove it to you.” He took three of the oranges and started to juggle them in the air, tossing one at a time and catching each in turn until they were all in the air, dancing together. “Could I do this if I still needed to be lying in bed?”

“Hmm...well, I suppose not.”

Before they could say anymore between them, the door opened, and Francis flicked his gaze toward it. When Diana stepped through, he was able to maintain the oranges being juggled in the air, yet then Phoebe stepped through, and the sight of her made his breath hitch. He promptly dropped all the oranges on the floor, at which point Josiah started sniggering with laughter.

“What happened in here?” Diana said, pointing at the oranges.

“A demonstration that went wrong, I think,” Josiah said, coming toward her. “Diana, there is something I need to show you.” He reached for her arm.

"Show me? Now? We were about to have tea," Diana said, gesturing to Phoebe.

Francis had asked Josiah if there was a way that he could orchestrate distracting Diana that afternoon so he could be alone with Phoebe, and it seemed his brother-in-law was taking this promise to heart.

"Tea can wait," Josiah said, towing her toward the door.

"I'm thirsty, Josiah," Diana said rather insistently.

"I'll take you to the river."

"I am not drinking that water!"

"Diana, there really is something I need to show you."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but here," Josiah muttered. Francis couldn't keep his laughter in anymore. Phoebe looked to him in surprise, just as Diana was finally hurried out of the door.

"This is absurd, what on earth is going on?" she declared.

"We'll be back soon," Josiah said with a smile before closing the door behind the two of them. Francis had to work hard to stop his laughter as he heard Diana's repeated complaints all the way down the corridor whilst Josiah dragged her elsewhere.

"What is going on?" Phoebe said as she turned to him with a smirk of mischief and folded her arms.

"My brother-in-law lacks subtlety today it seems."

"Hmm, you could say that," Phoebe said in agreement.

"I wanted to speak to you alone," he said, reaching for a Bergère settee and beckoning Phoebe to follow him. She didn't hesitate and hurried to sit down beside him. At first, there was half a cushion space between the two of them, but hating the sight of it, Francis found himself moving closer toward her, and she didn't move away.

"First, tell me how you are feeling today?" Phoebe said, her face taut with evident worry. Francis grew distracted looking at her features for a minute, thinking of how her green eyes were wide as she stared at him, and the skin around her mouth was tensed. It made his eyes linger on those lips, remembering the liberty he had taken in kissing her before.

"I am doing much better," he said with a small smile. "My dizziness is completely gone."

"Almost?" she said, pointing toward the oranges on the floor. Laughing and realizing he had left them where he dropped them, he hurried to his feet and picked the oranges up, placing them back down in the fruit ball.

"I was distracted, that is why I dropped the oranges," he said, then turned his attention back to her.

"And the pain? In your head?" she said, reaching out a hand toward him. He held his breath as she came near, wanting that touch. Her fingers were delicate as she softly brushed the bruise on his temple.

"Gone," he assured her. "In a matter of days, the physician says all I will have is a scar to remember the event." Her lips widened into a smile.

"Thank the Lord," she said, sighing with relief. "Now, why did you want to get me alone?"

"There is something I wish to tell you," he said and reached for her hand. She duly gave him her hand, and he marveled for a minute at the delicacy of her fingers in his. He could still clearly remember the dance they had shared at the assembly where they met and how

her hand had slotted into place in his. It was a perfect fit.

“You have me on tenterhooks, Francis,” she whispered. The use of his first name made him lift her hand to his face and kiss the back, holding her gaze as he did so. She bit her lip in response, her cheeks blushing all the more.

He had to tell her. Now. It was high time that she knew just how madly he had fallen in love with her. Once she knew too, perhaps she would give up altogether talking of going back to the Viscount? Maybe she would be willing to stay with Francis forever.

I pray to God she will.

“Phoebe, I am unsure how to say this, so I apologize if my words come out a little stuttered. It is just...since you have come here, lots has changed.”

“That is an understatement.”

“I suppose so,” he said with a chuckle. “What I’m trying to say is...” He was about to say the words when he paused, noticing as she wrinkled her nose and looked away from him. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“It’s just...” She paused and sniffed the air. “Do you smell smoke?”

Chapter 25

Phoebe followed Francis out of the room as he jumped to his feet, sniffing the air as she had done. When they reached the hallway, the stench grew stronger.

“Something is burning,” Francis said with horror in his tone. “Mrs Goodman!” he hollered for her, his voice bouncing around the walls.

Seconds later, she came running.

“Your Grace?” She appeared through a doorway.

“Has there been an accident in the kitchen?”

“No, Your Grace,” she said hurriedly, then she sniffed the air too. “Is there a fire?”

“There must be. Everyone, out. Now.” Francis turned Phoebe toward the door, but she planted her feet into the ground.

“What? No,” she said, pulling at him. “Where is Louisa?”

“I’ll find her, but please Phoebe, we have to get out. Now.”

“I’ll get the staff out.” Mrs Goodman ran off through the servant’s door to the other chambers.

Phoebe followed Francis out of the house, not caring if any of the staff in their haste to flee saw her hand in Francis’. It felt foolish to deny there was something between them anymore.

They hurried down the steps and out the front, where Phoebe tripped a couple of times on the pebbled driveway in her effort to

keep up with him.

“Josiah!” Francis roared. Lord and Lady Dodge appeared a few minutes later, from the direction of the river.

“Has something happened?” Lord Dodge called then the two of them came to a firm stop and stared up at the window of the house.

“In the name of our Lord,” Lady Dodge said and flung her hands to her mouth.

Phoebe whipped round, just as Francis did, and they both gazed up at the windows on the top floor of the manor house to see smoke curling out of two of the windows.

“It’s...my chamber,” Phoebe said with panic. “Oh my god. Louisa!” she cried the maid’s name and made an attempt to run back into the house, but Francis stopped her. He wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her backward.

Any other time, she would have been thrilled at such an intimate connection, but now, she was furious.

“Let me go! Louisa is in there!”

“Then I will get her.” Francis put her back down on her feet and pushed her toward Lord and Lady Dodge. “I give you my word, Phoebe, I will get her out, just please stay here.”

Phoebe couldn’t say any words. She was torn, between wanting her friend safe and fearing putting Hayward in danger.

“You...you cannot go near the fire,” she said after a minute. “It is too dangerous.”

“Nothing will stop me,” he said, backing up from her. “Josiah, do not let her back into the house. Understood?”

"I give you my word," Lord Dodge called back to him.

Francis ran inside, disappearing a second later. When Phoebe stepped forward, intent on following him, Lord and Lady Dodge stopped her.

"Trust him, my friend," Lady Dodge said, taking her hand. "He will find Louisa."



* * *

Francis ran into the house when he passed people on the stairs, all the staff that were running to get out, along with the maids and the butler.

"Has anyone seen Louisa?" he cried, but all the maids shook the heads, and most didn't even bother replying, all too afraid by the mention of a fire.

"You," Francis found one of the footmen at the top of the stairs. "Find volunteers to fight the fire. We must stop it from spreading."

"Yes, Your Grace," the man said hurriedly with a bow and ran off.

Francis ran across the corridor, heading straight for Phoebe's chamber. The nearer he got, the worse the smell grew, until the burning was thick and cloying at the back of his throat. He went to take hold of the door handle, but he found the knob hot to the touch. Swearing under his breath, he adjusted and put the sleeve of his jacket over the doorknob, before pushing the door open.

The sight that greeted him made him waver in the doorway, as though his legs had become wobbly and built out of nothing but air beneath him. Half the room was in flames, the bed was engulfed

and furniture around the bed were quickly taking hold. The smoke was seeping out of the windows, but it did not stop a cloud of this thick black smoke building at the top of the room and hovering on the ceiling, like a monster clinging to the ceiling molds.

“Louisa!” he called her name and then coughed from inhaling the smoke.

Behind him, there were footsteps of people running. He turned his head back to see footmen were approaching, carrying buckets of water and great troughs too, no vessel was too big, even though some vats had to be carried by two or three men at a time.

Looking away from them, Francis covered his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket and stepped into the room. The heat was instant and grating against his body. He squinted his eyes against the brightness of the light and gritted his teeth, looking around the room as the first footmen followed him in, ready to fight the blaze. He darted his head back and forth before finding something curled up at the side of the room.

“Louisa!” he called her name again, lowering the sleeve from his mouth just enough to be audible. She lifted her head off the floor a bit, before coughing and falling back down.

He ran toward her, thankful the fire had not yet caught the corner of this room and hauled her to her feet. She was dazed, in a half unconscious state.

“What happened to you?” he asked, but he didn’t need an answer. The roar of the fire and the catcalls of the footmen stopped him from hearing her even if she had given an answer, and the bruise that was developing on her temple told him what he needed to know. She had been struck and knocked out.

He dragged her out of the room, urging his men on with words as he passed them before they were beyond the door, then he hauled Louisa up into his arms and carried her through the corridor, down the stairs.

“He was here.”

“He? Who’s he? Was it the Viscount, Louisa?” Francis asked. She coughed a few times, with soot on her clothes and on her face.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice all creaky. “Someone was in the room. They struck me, then everything went black...I didn’t see them.”

“Whoever started the fire must have struck you,” he said knowingly as they reached the bottom of the stairs and hurried to the open door.

The second they were outside, Francis heard Phoebe calling for her friend. He carried Louisa all the way to Phoebe, where she was then placed on the ground. Diana and Josiah fussed around the maid, with Mrs Goodman shouting at the other staff for the stable boy to be sent for the physician at once, just as Phoebe reached out for Francis.

“You saved her,” she said, clinging to him. “Thank you.”

“You do not need to thank me,” he said, looking her over her repeatedly.

All that mattered to him was that she hadn’t been caught in the fire. With the flames being set alight in her room, then there was the chance that whoever had started the fire was hoping to hurt Phoebe, and Louisa’s entrance into the room had just been ill timed.

He glanced over his shoulder, aware that all the staff were nearby, but with their gazes upon the house and the smoke that was curling out of the window, he felt a little liberty to do as he wanted, without them noticing. He lifted Phoebe’s hand quickly to his lips and kissed the back.

“Thank god you were not in that fire,” he whispered to her, feeling a tightness in his throat at the idea. “It’s just too horrifying.”

"I am well, Francis," she said reassuringly. She was about to turn back to Louisa and attend her maid when Francis pulled on her hand another time.

He had been about to tell her how he really felt and then they had discovered the fire. It reminded him how fleeting these moments with her were, how they could be gone in an instant again. He would take this moment now, even if it was a very fleeting one indeed.

He leaned into her, just enough so that he could whisper in her ear.

"I'm in love with you, Phoebe."

As he leaned back, he watched as her lips parted in wonder, then she smiled, the kind of smile he had never seen on her face before. It spread a warmth inside him. Yet he backed up away from her and let her hand slip from his.

"No, Francis, where are you going?" she called to him.

"To fight the fire," he said, turning and running back into the house. It didn't matter to him that he had been lately injured, or that there was a risk involved. He would not let his staff take the risk of putting the flames out without being there beside them to help.

Francis ignored the shouted pleas that were calling him back out again. He was sure he could hear Diana's voice amongst those shouts, and Josiah's too, though Josiah seemed to give up calling for him quite quickly. Instead, he started calling for that stable boy to be sent to the physician again, insisting that he had to be on his way at once.

As Francis reached the chamber, he worked tirelessly with his men, all the staff and footmen that had come to his aid were carrying vats of water and trying their best to get the fire down. It took what felt like hours, with them even once having to throw the contents of a copper bath onto the flames. When the final flame was put out

with thick heavy blankets, windows were thrust open.

Francis was among the men as they all coughed and tried their best to clear their lungs. After a few minutes of kicking away the burnt debris in the chamber and breathing beside the open window to clear his lungs, Francis looked back into the room at the mess that had ensued.

Whoever set the fire had used the curtains around the four-poster bed to start it. With such material to fuel the flames, no wonder it had taken hold so quickly. The question was...who had started it?

As Francis took a step away, about to leave and head back down to see his family and Phoebe, something caught his eye. There was something on the wall beyond the four-poster bed, something painted there.

Slowly, with wary steps, Francis walked round the bed, tilting his head to see what had been left there for him to find. There were words painted in black on the white wall. They had been covered before by the carcass of the black and burnt-out bed, but they were now clear as day to see.

As Francis read the words, he felt that old dizziness return from his head wound. He recovered one of the few unburnt chairs from the chamber and sat down into it, flinging his body down in order to stay centered.

The words were thickly painted in this black ink, suggesting it had been taken from a broken inkwell bottle from nearby and painted on with something. Francis looked around, finding a pillowcase he at first had thought was burnt black discarded on the floor in the corner, but turned out to be covered in paint. He returned his gaze to the words on the wall in anger.

“It was him, after all. He’s been here. He knows she’s here,” he muttered to himself, along with a myriad of curses and exclamations.

‘You have been warned. Send her back.’

Chapter 26

The physician was still attending to Louisa and Mrs Goodman was talking to Constable Jenkins when Francis took Josiah's arm and led him away from the group, a little distance from the house and further down the pebbled driveway.

"It was the Viscount. He started the fire and must have hit Louisa, afraid he would be discovered," he said in a whisper.

"You are certain?" Josiah asked, glancing back to where Phoebe and Diana were sat close by Louisa's side, listening to the physician.

"He left a message painted on the chamber wall. He said it was a warning and demanded I send Phoebe back to him." Francis practically spat with the words for he was so angry. Josiah flinched as though Francis had struck him and began to run his hands frantically through his hair.

"We cannot stay here," Josiah said, his manner becoming deadly serious.

"Agreed. We must get everyone out of here. Where do we go?"

"My country estate in Devon is two days' ride. We should go there," Josiah said with a firm nod. "There's a coaching inn we always stay at on the way. We can stay there tonight."

"That sounds for the best," Francis agreed, looking back to the house. The fire was out, but who knew when the Viscount could come back for Phoebe now. "There is one thing I do not understand. Why not just come and take Phoebe? Why leave behind a warning?"

Josiah gripped his hair a few more times, pacing back and forth

before he spun back to Francis, his eyes widening with a kind of realization.

“Oh, we’re fools.”

“What do you mean?” Francis asked, feeling that same anger still burning in his stomach.

“I mean you are a duke, Francis,” Josiah said, gesturing to him. “Say that Viscount Ridlington was able to figure out where Diana and I went, for he obviously has done. The first thing he would do is figure out whose house this is. A duke’s no less!”

“Could you hurry up and get to the point, please, my temper is running rather short at this moment,” Francis said in a harried whisper, aware the Phoebe was looking over to them with concern and he didn’t want to scare her any further.

“I mean if he appealed to the law for his wife’s return, the law is more likely to side with a duke than a viscount. It’s a twisted world, but it is the world we live in. Money and status pay. Even if he turned up at the door and demanded Phoebe come back, you could shut the door in his face. You outrank him, Francis. That’s why he’s willing to try and get her back by other means.” Josiah’s words made Francis reel back on his feet and grip his head with both hands.

“God’s wounds...what will he try next then?” he asked with fear.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to stick around to find out. We leave. Now. This very minute!”

“Agreed.” Francis turned and hurried back to the physician. “Forgive me for the interruption, but is Louisa in a fit state to travel?”

“Your Grace,” the physician looked flustered by the interruption and hurried to bow before nodding. “Yes, fortunately her head

wound is not as bad as yours was. She will have a bruise, but she is fortunate she has no concussion.”

“Good, thank you,” Francis said and turned his attention to the three ladies that were looking up at him in confusion. “We are leaving the estate. Now.”

“What? Why so soon?” Diana asked, standing to her feet. Francis turned his gaze on Phoebe who made no objection though her countenance shifted, and she bit her lip.

“He did it, didn’t he?” she said in a breathless whisper. None of them needed to say the name to know who they were talking of.

“He did,” Francis said slowly. “He left a message, that is why we cannot waste a moment. I will leave none of you in danger. We are going.”

“Come on, Diana,” Josiah said, helping his wife to his feet. Diana made no further objection and nodded, following him.

“Mrs Goodman?” Francis called to the housekeeper. “If you would be so good as to arrange for bags for us all to be packed as soon as possible please.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she curtsied and hurried off to see to the task. Francis turned his attention back to Phoebe and Louisa as the physician retreated from them.

“What did he say?” Phoebe asked, still in her place sat down on the low-lying garden wall. “In his message?”

“It was a warning, that is all.” Francis reached for Louisa and helped her to her feet. “You are certain you are well enough to travel?”

“Yes, thank you, Your Grace,” she said with a small smile. “I owe you my life.”

“Think nothing of it.” Francis assured her, tapping her shoulder before he reached for Phoebe and helped her to her feet too. “We must leave as soon as we can, before he comes back for you again.”

“You do not think he’ll still be here?” Phoebe said, clutching tightly to his hand and looking back and forth around the estate.

“No. He will have crept in, set the fire and run, but the Constable can stay to do a search if he wishes. We are getting out of here.”

“Where?” she said in surprise.

“Devon.”

“Devon? So far away!”

“Not to me. Not far enough to my mind.” He kept hold of her hand as he walked off, taking her with him. He found the groom for the stable nearby and began to put in arrangements for their trip.

“All the carriages, Your Grace?” the groom said in surprise. “Why all of them?”

“Because I want each of the carriages to set off in different directions. I want it to be a mass of confusion, understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the groom nodded, though he was still bewildered. Francis turned his eyes on Phoebe, seeing she had the same confusion in her face.

“I want to reduce the chances of your husband finding us again. With so many carriages to follow instead of one, maybe we can escape him.”



* * *

The inn was hardly the grandest of affairs, but at this moment Phoebe would have gotten down on her hands and knees and praised its existence. They had been travelling in the carriage for hours, right into the dead of the night with the darkness swathed around them. They were all exhausted and achy from having been in the carriage so long, in particular Louisa and Francis looked tired, thanks to their recent injuries, though both denied they were.

As they headed into the inn, Phoebe was aware of Francis keeping his hand in hers. They checked into the inn using her false name of Lady Isabella, hoping to maintain the illusion of her being someone else for a little longer, though Phoebe thought it futile. If Graham found her once, surely, he could find her again?

The innkeeper was very solicitous and served them all a light supper in a dining room before they began to drift off to their beds. Before Phoebe could take her leave though, Francis pulled on her hand, begging her to tarry a little longer first. She nodded, showing she understood as they said goodnight to Lord and Lady Dodge. After the door closed behind them, she was left alone with Francis once again.

“You look tired,” she said as he re-took a seat at the dining table, turning the high-backed chair to face her fully as she sat down too.

“I feel it,” he said, rubbing the bags under his eyes. “But I will get no rest until I have asked you something first.”

“Ask me what?” she said softly, waiting as he lowered his hands from his face and set his eyes upon her again. For a minute, neither of them said anything, they just gaze at once another, leaving her to dwell on what he had said to her earlier that day before he ran back

into his house to stop the fire.

He is in love with me!

Such a thing she hadn't dared to hope for, but now it had been said, she was eager to jump out of her chair and fall into his arms, just to tell him that she loved him too.

"Your husband is a demon, Phoebe," Francis said eventually, his voice so quiet and strained that she had to lean forward to hear him. "I cannot imagine ever letting him get near you again, but he has already proved himself more than capable of finding us once."

"I know," she said, trying to hide the true extent of her fear, but it was no good, her hands trembled regardless. He reached out and took those hands in his, resting his elbows on his knees as he did so. With their palms pressed together, the trembling began to fade.

"I have a proposition for you," he whispered. "A way that you could escape that man forever, and you and I...could stay together."

"You do? How?" she said excitedly, leaning toward him with sudden hope.

"Come away with me." His words didn't register at first. She had to blink a few times before her mind worked to catch up.

"Away? Where?"

"To the continent." He leaned forward even more, nearly falling out of his seat as he clung onto her hands. "Run away with me. We'll go abroad. We'll go to Egypt, to Paris, to Italy, all those places you wanted to see, and I have always promised I'd devote my life to seeing. We could be happy together."

"But...living together as what?" she asked, frowning a little. He didn't answer at first, he hung his head and stared down at their joint hands, entwining their fingers together. "I see," she said softly,

having no wish to take her hands out of his. “And you’d be willing to risk your reputation in that way? Running off to live a life with a married woman?”

“In a heartbeat,” he said, lifting his eyes to hers again. She smiled a little at these words, feeling the warmth that his love could bring spreading through her.

“I love you,” she whispered, confessing what she didn’t have time to tell him earlier.

“Phoebe,” he said her name with relief and moved toward her, loosening one of her hands from his so he could lift his hand to her face and pull her toward him. He was about to kiss her again, how she wanted that kiss, but she couldn’t take it. She placed her hand in the center of his chest and stopped him from coming any closer.

“It is because I love you that I cannot say yes.” Her words made a heavy silence fall between them that was broken after a minute by Francis’ panicked tone.

“I do not understand.”

“I could not do it to you, Francis. You’d be a duke living in sin forever more with a married woman. You’d be ostracized wherever you went! Insulted, vilified, even. I couldn’t do that to you. It would be destroying your life as you know it.” The conviction swam inside her with these words. She knew she could never be so cruel to him as to accept his offer. “I wish to say yes, to be with you, of course I do, but I could not condemn you to that stained life. I love you too much for that.”

It was not difficult to see the heartbreak on his face. He turned his head downward and tears pooled in his eyes, prompting tears to spring to her own eyes and blur her vision. He lifted her hand and kissed the back, holding onto that kiss for longer than usual, until the tears began to slip down her cheeks.

“Let me know if you change your mind, Phoebe.” He stood to his

feet and left her there. “Good night.”

The moment he was gone, Phoebe’s tears came harder.



* * *

“My lady, please, you have to sleep.”

“How can I sleep?” Phoebe said, fidgeting on the side of the bed. She was sat in her nightgown on the very edge of the bed in the new room they had taken for the night at the inn. Her restless gaze passed around the room, jumping between the white curtains that were pulled tight across the tall windows, and the small fireplace in which the old fire was dying down to embers.

Phoebe wrapped her arms around her body, holding tightly onto herself as she bowed her head forward, letting her loose hair fall past her shoulders.

“How can I find peace again?” Phoebe muttered.

“You must, my lady,” Louisa said, coming and sitting at her side. “We are safe here. Hayward and the Marquess took great pains to get us here unnoticed. We are safe!”

Phoebe couldn’t believe it. Not when the bruise on Louisa’s head was so clear to see.

“How is your head?”

“I am perfectly well now,” Louisa assured her. “Now, into bed.” Louisa urged her to stand and pulled back the bed cover, practically pushing Phoebe inside in her eagerness to see her sleep.

Phoebe climbed in, but reluctantly, pulling the covers up to her neck stiffly and struggling to snuggle down into the bed. Louisa tucked a warmed bedpan under the covers then moved a candle to Phoebe's bedside. Just before she blew it out, Phoebe held out a hand above the covers.

"Oh no, keep it lit for a little longer," she pleaded, unwilling to see the room swathed in darkness just yet.

"As you wish, my lady," Louisa said with a sad sort of smile before tapping her hand in reassurance. "You do not need to be scared anymore. They are taking us far away from London, and far away from the Viscount. He won't be able to find you here."

I wish I could believe it.

"Good night, Louisa," Phoebe said softly.

"Good night, my lady." Louisa padded toward the door and left, closing it softly behind her with the latch. The moment she was gone, Phoebe lifted the covers over her head, even with the light of the candle keeping her company, she felt lonely and isolated in the room.

"I will never really be free of him, will I?" she whispered to herself under the covers. She knew that no matter how long she fought for this divorce, Graham was not going to give up battling her. He'd set Hayward's house on fire in desperation to scare her back home. It was always going to be the way now, she knew it.

She was unsure how long she stayed awake, but it had to be for hours, as she kept tossing and turning, completely incapable of finding any kind of comfort in the cot bed, though it had far more to do with what was on her mind than the state of the bed. More than once did she pull down the covers to look at the candle, and she could see the flame burning down the wax, until soon there was just a small nub of wax in the brass holder.

She fixed her eyes on the candle and found them slowly drifting

closed, at last sleep was finding her, drawing her into its deep depths.

Phoebe could feel herself dreaming. There were no words, and not much happened in the dream, but there were lots of pictures. She was back at the duke's estate, riding with Francis as she had done on her first day atop Cantante. Then she was in his house, having dinner with him. Finally, she was in the drawing room, where he had knelt before her and kissed her, showing her what a kiss could be like.

There was a sound. The thud made the dream vanish and Phoebe's eyes shot open.

She searched for the candle, but the light had gone out. All she could just about make out in the darkness was the curling tendril of smoke seeping away from the candle wick, suggesting it had either burnt itself out completely, or...someone had blown it out.

Terrified it was the latter, she pulled back in the bed, trying to push herself as close as possible toward the wall and away from the room. Her eyes danced about the place, trying to readjust to the darkness that was lit by the tiniest slither of moonlight that bled through the gap between the curtains.

Nothing moved and there was no other sound beyond Phoebe's own stuttered breathing. Then there was a second thud. Her head darted to the side, angling toward the sound. A shadowy figure began to move across the room.

Phoebe scrambled back in the bed, trying to sit up as the figure walked toward her, hulking and slowly approaching her.

"No, no, go away," she said hurriedly. She opened her mouth, about to scream and call for Louisa, for anyone who could be close enough by to hear her, but the figure leapt toward her.

In the darkness she couldn't make out their face, but she felt their hand latch over her mouth, clamping her lips shut and preventing

her from making any sound beyond a whimper against their palm. She wriggled against the grasp, trying to be free as his other hand came up and grabbed her wrists, taking hold of both of them. She bit his hand, forcing him to release her for just a second.

“Graham, let me go!” she shouted, but the hand came back over her mouth, muffling her cries before she could make any other sound.

“No, Phoebe. It’s me.”

That is not Graham’s voice.

Chapter 27

Francis was dreaming, there was someone in his room. He rolled over in the bed, trying to peer through the darkness and ascertain to himself that it truly was a dream. Then something moved toward him, shadowed in the moonlight coming through the window.

Something was lifted into the air, a chair perhaps, ready to be brought down on Francis' head.

"No!" Francis bellowed the word and rolled away, narrowly missing the chair striking his head. He fell onto the floor the other side of the bed and reached for his bag.

In the bottom of the bag, he'd brought something he hoped he would never have to use – his pistol. Yet as his hand reached for the pistol, he heard the person in his room lift the chair again. Unable to have the time to grab the weapon, Francis rolled away for a second time and jumped to his feet.

This time, the chair shattered across the floor into pieces, giving Francis the brief moment that he needed to jump away. He grabbed one of the pieces from the floor and hurled it at his attacker, who promptly squealed and reared back.

Francis rushed to the window and flung back the curtains entirely, in the full moonlight he had a perfect view of his attacker, with the same ponytail on his head that he had observed the night he had chased someone out of his estate who had then struck him.

"Lord Ridlington," Francis said with fury in his tone as the Viscount snatched another piece of the broken chair off the floor. Francis didn't have time to say anymore, as the wood was thrown at him, and he had to dodge it. He rounded the small settee that had been in his room and ran for the door, but as he flung it open, he heard

the click of a pistol.

The sound was something he knew well enough after all these years and he froze in position in the doorway.

“Do not move, or I shoot,” the Viscount said. Francis did as he was told, the only movement he allowed himself was heavy breathing. Slowly, Lord Ridlington walked toward him, before prodding him in the back with the pistol. “Walk forward.”

Francis followed the instruction, walking out into the landing to see the candles were still lit, basking the small inn with orbs of orange light. He glanced between the doorways that led to other rooms, cursing the inn’s emptiness that night. As they were the only guests, there was no one to come to their aid.

“Further,” the Viscount ordered, pushing Francis in the back another time. He hesitated a little when he passed the doorway to Josiah’s and Diana’s chamber, seeing it open with the bedding half on the floor, suggesting they had clambered out of the bed as quickly as he himself had done.

“To the stairs.”

Francis turned in the corridor and made his way to the landing, breathing so heavily in his anger that his nostrils flared.

“Where is she?” he asked at last, knowing he didn’t need to say Phoebe’s name for the Viscount to know who they were talking of. “What have you done to her?”

“Nothing. Yet.” The words made Francis rear round, ready to strike the Viscount. “Ah! Stop there.” Lord Ridlington raised the pistol higher, pointing directly at Francis’ face in warning. “Down the stairs.”

Slowly, still breathing heavily, Francis took the first step on the staircase, turning to see that at the bottom of the stairs were Josiah

and Diana, both equally under dressed. They were being kept in position by a man wearing a footman's clothes, possibly the same man that Francis had seen driving the carriage that was following them when Diana and Josiah came to stay with him. This man had a blade outstretched, warning the two of them off from making any attempt to flee.

"The Duke that took my wife from me," the Viscount muttered. His voice made Josiah and Diana turn to look up at Francis. "Did you make her your whore as well?"

Francis let out a string of insults hurled at the Viscount, not afraid to hold back with what he thought of Lord Ridlington, or to restrain at the swear words.

"At least I have never stolen another man's wife," the Viscount said and prodded Francis in the back with the pistol.

"I never stole her," he said with feeling, "but I happily would have taken her from you." The words were ill chosen, for there was a grunt of anger from behind him and a sharp kick to his lower back. Francis was unprepared for it and the sheer strength of that kick sent him flying down the stairs. He rolled across each step, the nosing pushing into his ribs and arms as he cascaded down, unable to stop his fall.

When Francis collided with the bottom of the stairs, face flat to the floorboards, he felt winded, the air taken from him completely.

"Francis!" Diana's voice was nearby, panicked.

Yet a stronger set of hands took hold of Francis' arms and helped move him to his knees. Francis looked up to see Josiah was helping him. Just like Francis, Josiah was dressed in nothing more than his trousers and his shirt, with his hair mussed. Behind him, Diana was standing in the middle of the entrance hall of the inn, both hands on her face, wearing her dressing gown with her hair falling past her shoulders.

“Get up.” Lord Ridlington’s voice ordered. Francis stumbled to his feet with Josiah aiding him, then turned to look up the stairs.

The inn was hardly the biggest of places, but from this position Francis could see just why it had hurt so much to fall so far down the steep steps. Lord Ridlington was walking down those steps with the pistol hanging loose in his hand, down by his side.

“Where is she?” Francis said, managing to ask through the pain. Halfway down the steps, Lord Ridlington lifted the pistol and pointed it directly at Francis.

“No!” Diana yelled.

Josiah took hold of Francis’ shoulder and dragged him backward, a little further away from the pistol.

“Where my wife is, is no concern of yours,” Lord Ridlington spat with the words.

“Then let’s try another,” Francis said, unwilling to back down. “Where are the innkeeper and his wife?”

“In there,” Lord Ridlington pointed to a sitting room nearby where the door was closed. “Tied up.” Diana took a step toward the door, but he sharply moved the pistol so that it was aimed at her. “Do not move toward them.”

She retreated instantly and Josiah pulled her behind him, shielding her from the gun fire.

“I...do not understand,” Francis said between panting breaths as he tried to move past the new bruises that were quickly developing across his body. “How did you find us?”

“You obviously do not pay your groom enough,” Lord Ridlington said with a smile. “A few coins and he was happy to tell me where you had gone.”

Francis cursed loudly.

“How about before?” Josiah called to the Viscount. “How did you know we had gone to Hayward’s house?”

“That was quite by chance.” He descended the last of the steps with a small smile in his face. “That sniveling little lawyer you persuaded my wife to hire has thieves that like to hang around his doorstep.”

Francis winced at the recollection – the thief that had accosted him and Phoebe in the street had looked straight at Phoebe and could well have seen that she was a woman dressed as a boy.

“One thief was only too happy to talk about the people he’d seen going in and out of Mr Preston’s office, including a woman dressed as a boy, on the arm of a duke. The same duke your carriage went to later that day.”

Francis cursed again. He had been so certain that they had managed to lose the man that followed them through the streets, clearly, they had not been careful enough.

He took a step forward, away from Josiah and Diana.

“Where is Phoebe?” he said with an insistent tone.

“That is none of your business.”

“It is my business! It is the point of my being now.” Francis shouted the words, not caring that they echoed back at him off the walls of the inn. “I will not let you take her away!”

“Really? You think you can stop me?” Lord Ridlington said with a smirk of derision as he turned the pistol back to Francis.



* * *

“No, no, this cannot be possible,” Phoebe said as the man before her released his hand from her mouth. “Father? What are you doing here?”

The last time she had seen him was at the assembly where she had decided to flee her husband’s house and hide within Hayward’s home. Her father had been uninterested in her even that night, not caring for her beyond insulting her. Now he was here? Having crept into her chamber at an inn in the countryside?

“What is there not to understand? Stupid girl,” he said with venom and took hold of her wrists, dragging her out of the bed. She half fell out, landing on her knees in such a way that she yelped in pain. “You have betrayed the name of your family, betrayed your husband. You went on the run and have been hiding with a duke? Did you think I would never find out?”

“I did not care if you found out!” she cried in truth. “I do not want to stay married to Graham –”

She was cut off from saying anymore as he used his grasp on her wrists to drag her to her feet. In the darkness around them, she couldn’t make out the color of his eyes, nor the tightened skin around his face, but she could see his slicked hair was coming undone in his wildness.

“Do you think you remotely have a choice in the matter?” he said, spitting with the words. “You are going home. Now.”

“No!” She fought against him, trying to be free, but he didn’t let her escape and he was too strong. It didn’t matter how much she fought against that grasp, the pincer like grip around her wrists was

unrelenting, pinning her in place. "I will not go back to him, Father. Why would you take me back there? Why are you helping him? I am miserable there!"

"I agreed you were to marry him. *You* cannot undo that promise and suddenly decide you do not want to be married to him anymore."

"I never wanted to marry him in the first place."

He lifted a hand as though he would strike her, but she squealed and cowered away, making him stop from landing the hit. With one hand still on one of her wrists, he moved her toward the door, heaving her to it. She grabbed first at the bed, trying desperately to stay where she was, but his strength outmatched hers, and she was soon dragged through the door, kicking and screaming all the way.

"Let me go, Father!" she ranted and railed, but he ignored everything she said. Out in the corridor, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her high into the air, so that her feet could no longer try to escape him either. She scraped her fingernails against his arms, trying to be released, but he wouldn't let her go. "No! Release me! Francis!" She heard herself calling Francis' name before she had realized she had done it.

"Phoebe!?" His cry of fear came back to her, but it was further away than she had anticipated, not from his room at all.

When her father reached the stairs, he tackled her down it, even when she tried to grab the banister to stop him from taking her any further.

"Let her go," Francis bellowed.

Phoebe snapped her head round to see Francis was standing in the entrance hall, in front of Lord and Lady Dodge, all in their night things. In front of Francis was Graham, with a pistol outstretched in his hand, and the barrel pointing straight at Francis' chest.

“Who is that?” Francis said, pointing up at her father.

“This is Gerard Lewis, Baron Notley. My wife’s father,” Graham answered before Phoebe could. Francis’ face stiffened even more, his angry glare turning away from Graham and onto her father.

“You would manhandle your daughter in such a way and take her back to a man that beats her?” he accosted her father with the words, shouting them so loudly that Phoebe even felt her father flinch around the grasp he had on her, just as they reached the bottom step.

“They are married. If she runs from him, she destroys my reputation as well as hers. What else do you expect me to do?” her father said with a sneer as he released her.

Phoebe wavered on her feet, nearly falling over before she stepped forward. She was hurrying toward Francis, intent on reaching him as he moved to her, then something moved in their way. It was Graham.

Phoebe felt the firm strike across her cheek before she had seen it coming. It made her rear back on her feet, and this time fall over completely, landing on the floor in a heap.

“You...” Francis swore, rushing toward Graham, but there was a click of a pistol and Graham turned round, pointing it directly at Francis’ chest another time.

“I will use it,” Graham said in a warning tone. “Do not think I wouldn’t.”

“You are going to kill a duke?” Lord Dodge said with incredulity. “You’d be strung up in court within a week, hanging from the gallows less than a day after that!”

“Unless there were no witnesses,” Graham said, turning his head to Lord and Lady Dodge.

Phoebe looked up from where she was cradling her cheek on the floor, realizing with horror just what he meant. Moving past the stinging in her cheek, she shifted to her knees and looked between her friends that she loved like family.

Lady Dodge who was hiding behind her husband with tears on her cheeks, the woman who had encouraged her that she deserved a better life. Lord Dodge who had tried to help her obtain a divorce in every way, even finding her a lawyer. Lastly, Francis, whom she loved more than anyone else in the world. She couldn't see any of them hurt because of her.

"Graham, please," she said, calling up to him with a soft tone. He angled his head toward her, showing he was listening. "I will come with you."

Chapter 28

Francis couldn't believe the words. He flicked his gaze toward Phoebe, seeing her on her knees on the floor, her hair mussed around her shoulders and her face flushed red with fear. He would have done anything to pull her into his arms and hide her from this mess, but it was not possible now.

Surely, she didn't say that!

"No, Phoebe," he whispered, pleading with her. She flicked his gaze to him, then quickly returned it to Lord Ridlington. The brevity of that look hurt as much as the words. "You cannot go back to him."

"I have to," she said quickly before addressing her husband alone. "Please, Graham. Do not hurt them, and I promise to come with you now."

Francis winced, covering his face at the words. She was going to exchange her life for theirs, just to keep them safe.

You deserve a better world than this, Phoebe.

"At last, she speaks some sense," Baron Notley said, reaching for his daughter's arm. He took hold of her, under the shoulder, and wrenched her to her feet. She staggered for a second, before reaching out, away from her father, and placing a hand on Graham's shoulder. It was such a soft touch, that Francis expected Lord Ridlington to react in some way, but he didn't. He continued to stare down the barrel of the pistol, straight at Francis.

"Lord Ridlington," Baron Notley was pleading with him this time, though his voice was a lot harsher than his daughter's. "You do not need to pull that trigger."

“Need to and want to are two very different things,” Lord Ridlington said and lifted the pistol a little higher, so that it was no longer pointing at Francis’ chest, but at his face.

Francis lowered his hands from his face, staring back at Lord Ridlington. He tried to ignore the frightened whimpers of Diana a little distance behind him and the pleading desperation of Josiah. He glared back at the Viscount, certain that if Lord Ridlington dared to hurt him, the man would suffer for it.

“You have one shot before you would have to reload,” Francis said, muttering in anger. “How good an aim have you got?”

“At this distance, even I think I could hit you,” Lord Ridlington said, taking another step toward Francis.

“Graham, please!” Phoebe begged, stepping forward again. Even Baron Notley let his daughter move forward this time.

“I will not go to the gallows for murder, you fool,” Baron Notley said. “We have her back. Do not pull the trigger or you condemn us both to death.”

“He took my wife from me,” Lord Ridlington snapped, so angrily that spittle hung from his lips. Francis stared at him, unblinking, realizing what truly bothered the Viscount about this situation. It wasn’t that Phoebe herself had left him; it was the idea that another man had taken what he considered was *his* possession. Francis’ gaze turned to Phoebe, knowing with horror how awful it was for the Viscount to think of her as a ‘possession’.

“I left,” Phoebe said, pulling on the Viscount’s arm. “Francis didn’t take me, I left!”

Francis flinched, hearing the mistake that she had made. As did the Viscount, who snapped his gaze toward her.

“You called him Francis,” he said, shaking his head. “Not Your

Grace, not the Duke of Hayward, but *Francis*.” Phoebe reared back slightly, away from his anger, yet she collided with her father. The Baron shoved her in the back, holding her in place. Lord Ridlington snapped his gaze to Francis. “You really did make her your whore, didn’t you?”

“I did not,” Francis insisted.

“Graham, please!” she begged. That pistol was getting closer and closer to Francis’ face. Even Francis knew the inaccuracy of the pistol or the shooter would be offset by this close distance. He felt the muscles in his neck twitch out of fear.

I cannot die like this.

He started looking around, desperately seeking a way out of this mess, for all of them, but no ideas were occurring to him.

“I’ll come with you,” Phoebe said, stepping forward again and addressing Lord Ridlington. “I’ll come now, and I’ll be a proper wife, and I promise...I will not leave you again.”

Those words tore at Francis’ chest. It was like the bullet had been fired after all, landing somewhere near his heart as he turned his eyes on Phoebe.

“All this talk of divorce will be over?” Baron Notley insisted from behind her. “You will withdraw the paperwork?”

“I will.” Phoebe nodded with the words.

“How can I be certain you will not run again?” Lord Ridlington asked, his tone demanding.

“Because I put my friends’ lives above my own. I’ll come with you, but you must promise not to hurt them.”

Francis opened his mouth to object, but the pistol just got nearer to

his face, silencing him.

“Then we have a deal,” Baron Notley said. “Lord Ridlington, lower the pistol.”

Yet the Viscount didn’t appear to hear the words, for his gaze was still on Francis and the pistol. Francis stood a little straighter, realizing that no amount of persuasion was going to make it through the red mist of anger that had descended on Lord Ridlington now.

“If you are going to shoot me, then do it,” Francis said darkly, “I do not see the point of dragging out the moment.” His words were met by exclamations of horror from Diana and Phoebe.

“Do not shoot him, you fool,” Baron Notley said, his voice getting louder.

“There has to be a punishment,” Lord Ridlington said. “No, there has to be...”

The pistol was inches from Francis’ face as Lord Ridlington took a step forward.

“No, Graham!” Phoebe screamed, placing her hands over her face. Francis turned his gaze on her, wanting his last look in this world to be of something that he loved. Her green eyes were full of unshed tears and her skin had turned pale.

Then she reared forward.

Francis wasn’t prepared for it, but the pistol went off. He ducked down to avoid the fire, but he only just missed it as Phoebe had tackled Lord Ridlington. Francis looked up, feeling a hand going straight for his head, for the bullet had whistled through his hair, missing him by the skin of his teeth.

Lord Ridlington was falling over from where Phoebe had shoved

him, trying to dislodge his hold on the pistol.

She saved me!

Francis went to help her, to grab Lord Ridlington and put this matter to rest.

“My Lord!” There was a cry from the footman. Francis glanced round in the commotion to see the footman throwing another pistol toward Lord Ridlington, this one clearly loaded and ready to fire.

Lord Ridlington snatched it from the air, just as he dropped the other one to the ground.

Francis could see where he was turning that pistol – straight toward Phoebe. Francis leapt forward, grabbing Phoebe around the waist before her father could get to her, and dragging her further back in the room, until she was firmly behind him with his body shielding hers. Her hands were buried in his arms, clinging to him, with her front pressed to his back.

Lord Ridlington lifted the second pistol and turned it back to Francis.

“I will not let you hurt her again,” Francis said.

“Then I’ll have to shoot you to get to her,” Lord Ridlington said, his finger reaching for the trigger.

“Stop!” The shrill cry that went up made them all flinch. Francis felt the way Phoebe twitched behind him, her fingers digging further into his arms.

Francis lifted his gaze to the top of the stairs to find Louisa was standing there. She was the source of the cry. Dressed in her night shift, with a dressing gown wrapped tightly around her shoulders, she was slightly murky in the faded candlelight, but what was clear to see was what was in her hands.

My pistol...

She must have gone to his room for help when she heard all the noise, for in her clutches was the pistol he had brought with him, evidently prepared with shot. He had seen her prepare the pistol enough times now by herself to know she was capable of doing it.

That pistol was trained on Lord Ridlington.

“The maid?” Lord Ridlington asked in confusion. “Laura?”

“Louisa! Her name is Louisa!” Phoebe snapped with anger. It showed how little notice Lord Ridlington had taken of his own household.

“Put down the pistol, you stupid girl,” Baron Notley said distractedly, evidently not seeing her as a credible threat. “You could end up shooting yourself.”

“Believe me, she is a fine shot,” Francis said. His simple words made Baron Notley stiffen and stand a little straighter, turning to look at just how much Louisa had the pistol trained on Lord Ridlington.

“Lower your pistol, my Lord,” Louisa said, still addressing him so formally despite the agonizing situation.

“Like I’m going to do that,” Lord Ridlington scoffed. “Put the pistol down.”

“No!” she screamed the word. “I will fire, my Lord. Let my mistress go. Let her leave, not just tonight, but your life as well. She deserves her own life back.”

Francis felt his lips flicker into the smallest of smiles. The scales of power in the room had turned a little, and all that power now rested with Louisa.

"You will let her go," she said again. Her voice tremored a little, as did her hands, for the pistol shook back and forth.

Don't shake, Louisa. Remember, you could end up shooting any of us then!

"I don't fancy dying, Lord Ridlington," Baron Notley said with strength. "Lower the pistol."

"I am not coming this far to give up now," Lord Ridlington spat the words. The pistol was still trained on Francis, though he was looking up the stairs to Louisa, and where she stood at the top of the staircase.

Francis could feel Phoebe shaking behind him with fear. He tried to subtly push her a little further behind him, terrified that if either of the pistols went off, they could strike her.

"You will have to give up," Francis called to Lord Ridlington. "Shoot us, and Louisa shoots too. You have no choice."

Lord Ridlington snapped his gaze back to Francis. He was like a man possessed, the whites of his eyes visible around his pupils, sweat beading on his forehead and making the loose strands of his red hair damp.

"Lower the pistol and give up your claim on Phoebe's life," Francis ordered.

Louisa began to walk down the stairs, just a couple of steps, but the creaking boards were enough to make Lord Ridlington snap his gaze back round to her. It made her freeze in the middle of the steps.

"Lower the pistol now, or I shoot," Louisa ordered, her lip trembling and her hands shaking even more.

Keep your hands still, Louisa! Francis silently begged.

“I can’t do that.” Lord Ridlington’s words were final.

Francis backed up instantly, seeing the danger even before Lord Ridlington could pull on the trigger of the pistol. He shoved Phoebe even further back, even as she shouted Louisa’s name, calling for her to shoot.

“Louisa!”

Francis felt Josiah’s and Diana’s hands on the two of them as well, pulling them backward.

“No!” Baron Notley’s shout of fear joined the cacophony of the commotion. Francis looked up to see what the Baron was objecting to – Lord Ridlington was spinning round in the center of the hallway and turning the gun on Louisa.

He’s going to shoot Louisa!

“Shoot, Louisa!” Francis ordered her, but she didn’t.

Her hands trembled even more around the pistol, shaking so much that the barrel was barely pointed in one direction. Lord Ridlington aimed up the pistol, closing one eye in order to narrow his gaze and aim perfectly.

“It’s you or him, Louisa. Shoot!” Phoebe screamed from behind Francis.

Two pistol shots went off, one straight after another, echoing around the entrance hall.

Chapter 29

“Louisa!” Phoebe screamed her name’s friend in panic as the shots ricocheted around the room.

Louisa was shaking, with the pistol now fired and a smoke vapor escaping from the barrel of the pistol, yet she seemed unharmed. She looked over her body, her lip trembling and her gaze restless. She was not hurt.

Phoebe felt Francis push her backward, until she was in Lady Dodge’s arms.

“Keep her safe,” Francis ordered before barreling forward. He was heading straight for Graham.

Phoebe’s gaze flicked toward her husband, to see what had happened. The pistol was still in his hands, but he was not reloading it. He wavered on his feet for a minute, the strength in his body seemingly vanished.

“Is he...?” Phoebe asked, unable to finish the sentence.

In answer to her question, Graham began to fall backward. Francis grabbed hold of him, stopping him from smacking his body against the floor. With one hand he snatched the pistol out of Graham’s hand, and with the other around Graham’s chest, he lowered him down to the floor.

“We need a physician! Now!” Francis ordered.

Lord Dodge stepped away from their side and reached toward the footman, grabbing him by the scruff of his collar.

“If you don’t want to face a court for what you have done here

tonight, fetch a physician and a constable – now,” he demanded. The footman nodded a little, before tearing himself out of Lord Dodge’s hands and running for the door.

“No...no...this cannot be happening,” Baron Notley was muttering to himself. Phoebe snapped her gaze toward her father, seeing how he had gone pale and was veering sideways on his feet, as if he would faint at any moment.

Francis lowered Lord Ridlington down to the floor completely, then placed the pistol in the waistband of his trousers. Kneeling over Lord Ridlington, he called to him, trying to rouse him.

“Wake up. If you don’t want to die, then you have to stay conscious,” Francis said loudly.

Phoebe’s gaze darted between Louisa and Graham. Louisa sank down until she was sitting in the middle of the staircase, staring at the pistol in her hands as though it were a wild animal.

“She’s a killer! We all saw it! She shot him!” the Baron shouted as loudly as he could.

“He’s not dead yet,” Francis said. “And she had no choice but to shoot.”

Phoebe stepped forward, out of Lady Dodge’s hands. Her friend seemed reluctant to let her go, but Phoebe went anyway, her steps taking her straight toward her father.

“You did this,” Phoebe said quietly. Her father backed up so much that he collided with the banister railing around the staircase, his lips parted in horror.

“I-I?” he stuttered in amazement. “I did not pull the trigger!”

“Who gave Graham the pistol?” she asked. She had lived in Graham’s house long enough to know he hadn’t owned a pistol, yet

her father had a collection of them. It was a collection he had prided himself on, ornate with some antique items as well as more modern pistols. “You did, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Accessory, then,” Lord Dodge called from across the room as he too knelt beside Lord Ridlington. “They could hang you for that.”

“No...No...” the Baron didn’t seem to be in control of his own body. Phoebe watched as he backed away from her, trying to get around the banister railing before heading straight to the door. He ran out like a child fearful of the rod, rather than an aging man, making the door bang and clatter against the wall on his way out.

“Is he...dead?” Phoebe asked in panic, looking back round to Lord Ridlington on the floor. She couldn’t see him from their position. His face was blocked from where Francis was kneeling.

“Not yet,” Francis said calmly.

Slowly, Phoebe walked forward, tiptoeing in her bare feet across the floorboards until she was standing over her husband.

“Wake up, man,” Francis ordered again. “You need to stay awake.” He struck Lord Ridlington around the face for good measure, just in the effort to keep him awake.

Lord Ridlington flinched, but his eyes would not open. Phoebe’s gaze lowered down to the wound placed firmly in the center of his chest. From the clothes, it was not clear to see the extent of the bullet wound, but the blood was evident, blooming across his shirt and jacket.

Phoebe looked up to Louisa who was crying in the middle of the steps. She dropped the pistol on the staircase and shuffled away from it on her rear.

“You are an excellent shot, Louisa,” Lord Dodge said. Yet it didn’t cause any comfort. Louisa just began to cry even more. Lady Dodge

hurried past the group and went straight to Louisa's side, sinking down beside her and wrapping an arm around the maid's shoulder in comfort.

The breath coming out of Graham was husky and strained, as though he was struggling to breathe at all. The sound of it made Phoebe look back toward him.

She was numb. Death was not something she would ever wish on anyone, yet she didn't know what to feel now. Louisa had to shoot, or she could have ended up in this same position. It was not a desired situation, but one borne out of necessity.

"It's no good, Francis," Josiah said, as he lifted a hand and placed it to Lord Ridlington's neck, checking his pulse. "He's fading."

They both reared back a little from Lord Ridlington. Phoebe could feel all of their eyes turning on her, but she didn't know what to do. She supposed many wives would sink down to their husband's side and kiss them on the forehead in a goodbye, something of the kind, yet she could not. Merely thinking about giving Graham such a gentle touch felt wrong, not when she thought of all the hurt that he had caused her, plus his intention to kill not only Louisa, but Francis too.

"Goodbye, Graham," she said calmly and took a step away from his body. She turned her gaze away, hearing the last breath he took.

"He's gone," Francis said.



* * *

Francis had explained repeatedly to the constable what had happened, yet they were going over it again anyway. He looked

around the sitting room of the inn, amazed at the mess that had unfolded.

Through the doorway, back in the entrance hall, Lord Ridlington was still laid on the floor, but he had been covered by a sheet and hidden from view. In the sitting room, the innkeeper and his wife had been released from their ties and were partaking in strong glasses of ale that had been prepared for everyone for the shock.

Phoebe and Louisa were sat side by side, hand in hand, gripping one another so tightly that the knuckles of their hands were turning white. Diana was sat close by to the two of them, staring at what was now her empty glass of ale.

Josiah was by Francis' side as they sought to explain again what had happened.

"Why did they come for Lady Ridlington if she was filing for divorce?" the first constable asked as the night watchman beside him scribbled down some notes in a small notebook with a pencil.

"Some men do not accept such things as divorce easily," Josiah explained. "He was determined to take Lady Ridlington back with him, come what may. Lord Ridlington brought his father-in-law too."

"Where is he now?" the constable asked.

"Gone," Francis answered with a sigh as he ruffled his hair. "When Lord Ridlington was shot, Baron Notley ran out of here. I don't think he fancied being charged with being party to the kidnap of his own daughter."

"That is what it was?" the watchman said, looking up from his notebook with a strained voice.

"Without a doubt," Francis answered, keeping his voice strong. "They tried to take her away and threaten to shoot us if we

attempted to stop them.”

“Lord Ridlington was going to shoot you anyway, Francis,” Josiah said, pinching the bridge of his nose in stress.

“Yes, thank you for the reminder,” Francis said wryly, watching as the constable and the watchman exchanged fearful glances.

“Rest assured, Baron Notley will be charged for his part in tonight,” the constable said, standing a little taller.

“Thank you,” Francis said, glancing across the room to where Phoebe was talking so quietly with Louisa. They were so far apart that she couldn’t hear their conversation. He was almost pleased for it, as he did not know how she would react to hearing her father would end up in court for what he had done.

“Would you like to break that news to Lady Ridlington, Your Grace?” the constable asked. Francis turned his gaze back to the constable, seeing how perceptive a comment it was.

“Yes please, I think it best,” Francis said with a firm nod.

“Right, then we come back to the crux of the matter...” the constable paused and shifted between his feet, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “A viscount has been killed.”

“That he has,” Francis said, sensing where this was going. “But he was a man the same as any other, and an unkind one at that.”

The constable glanced toward the watchman who shifted just as awkwardly, wiping his forehead with his sleeve.

“The magistrate will want someone charged for such a crime,” the constable said eventually in a harried whisper.

“You want to charge a maid with murder?” Josiah said, not afraid to keep the derision out of his voice. “It was self-defense.”

“Was it absolutely? Would you be willing to swear to it in court?” the constable said with a kind of desperation. “I know the magistrate; he’ll insist that someone be charged. In order to refute it, I will need firm evidence.”

“Louisa had no choice,” Francis said with strength and folded his arms across his chest. The constable and the watchman turned their gazes toward Francis, both falling quiet and attentive. “He was firing at her. If you want proof, then go find the bullet he shot in her direction. It landed in the staircase, somewhere near her feet. If she hadn’t shot, he would have killed her.”

“No man would convict her in court,” Josiah said, matching Francis with the same firm tone. “Surely you would not drag her through the chaos of a trial just to be cleared at that point.”

“They would clear her. Categorically so,” Francis said. Seeing the way that the constable and the watchman were looking at him, Francis could see a route to pull the situation to his favor. It was hardly something he liked to do, seeing it as using his superior status to get his way, but on this occasion, it was for the right decision. “You have not only the words of a marquess and a marchioness to prove it, as well as a viscountess, but a duke too. Do you think a magistrate would disagree with my word?”

He could see the way Josiah smiled a little, trying to hide it, knowing full well what Francis was doing. The constable and the watchman exchanged glances again before turning back to Francis.

“No, the magistrate would not disagree with your word,” the constable said eventually.

“Then you have your answer,” Francis said with finality. “Louisa fired in self-defense and Lord Ridlington was a victim of his own wish to murder. Is that clear?”

“Abundantly so,” the constable said with a firm nod. “Thank you, Your Grace.” He pointed his head to the watchman, ordering him to write down some more notes.

Silence descended for a minute, the only sound being the pencil that scratched on the paper. Francis felt a small elbow in the side of his stomach and turned to see Josiah was staring at him, trying to communicate something soundlessly.

“What?” Francis mouthed the word. Josiah gestured back across the room, toward where Phoebe was sat, hanging her head. She looked pale with her brown curls hanging around her ears. The innkeeper had provided a blanket to throw around her shoulders to help her modesty, but nothing seemed to matter to her right now. She was in shock.

Francis nodded at Josiah, showing he understood.

“With Lord Ridlington’s passing, Lady Ridlington will take possession of her home again. They have no children, and I understand he has no siblings either. The property will be hers; do you have any objection to her reclaiming the property tomorrow?” he asked, deciding it was best to get to the point.

“No objection,” the constable said hurriedly. “We will inform the magistrate at once of what has happened and the news will be delivered to London in the coming day. Lord Ridlington’s body will be taken back to the city for burial too.”

“Thank you,” Francis said, nodding a little.

“Your Grace?” A small voice called his attention from across the room. He turned to see Louisa standing from her seat, with Phoebe doing her best to pull her back down, but she wouldn’t be moved. Louisa stood a little taller, her body stiff and tears on her cheeks. “Will I be arrested?”

Francis smiled as gently as he could, seeing the fear in her face.

“No, Louisa, you will not,” he said, watching as her lips parted in amazement. “The constable agrees it was self-defense and there is no point at all in seeing a court for it. You did the right thing, Louisa.”

Her tears came more heavily as she capitulated back down to the chair. Phoebe wrapped her arms around her friend, keeping her tight into her side as Diana moved to the same settee and placed a hand on Louisa's shoulder in comfort.

"What of my father?" Phoebe asked, addressing her question to Francis. He glanced toward the constable before crossing the room toward her, needing to answer her without the room watching on as a kind of audience.

She was peering around Louisa's shoulder as he reached her side.

"He will be arrested, Phoebe," he said softly. "For assault and attempted kidnap."

She nodded though she bit her lip, holding back more tears.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"He never liked me," she whispered into the air. "He hated me because I took my mother away from him. She died in childbirth. After that...he became a bitter man."

He reached out to her, needing touch. She reached out too, and their hands connected in the air, clinging onto each other.

"He will not come for you again, Phoebe. He will be charged for trying to help Lord Ridlington." His words seemed to bring her some comfort, though she bit her lip all the more, holding back tears. "You're safe now. You're a free woman."

"Free?" she said as one tear escaped down her cheek. "I never thought such a day would come."

Chapter 30

Phoebe was numb as she watched the coffin being lowered into the ground. She had insisted that she attended the funeral alone, with only Louisa as her company, yet she felt strangely lonely there without Francis, or Lord and Lady Dodge nearby.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...” the vicar said as the coffin reached the bottom of the earth that had been dug out for Graham’s grave.

The grave attendant came round with a box of earth and proffered it to Phoebe first. With no other family left in the world, she was the only relation Graham had and the first who was supposed to grab the soil and throw it on his coffin in memorial. Yet she struggled to do it.

Louisa’s arm was linked with hers, and Louisa used that connection to subtly elbow Phoebe into action. With a trembling hand, she reached out and placed a hand into the box, grabbing hold of some soil in her palm. The grains dug into her skin, burying themselves in the lines of her palm before she threw it onto the coffin.

“Are you all right?” Louisa whispered to her as the box was passed around.

“I do not know,” Phoebe said quietly. She tried to wipe her palm clean on her skirt. “I cannot dance on his grave, Louisa,” she whispered as the vicar closed the final prayer of the funeral. “I could never delight in death.”

“I know,” Louisa said softly, patting her arm through their connection.

“Yet can I mourn him either?” she asked, lifting her chin up from

the grave. She looked to the sky instead, watching as the grey clouds seemed to part in the distance, showing a glimpse of the sunshine trying to gleam through. "I cannot do that in earnest. He hurt me too much for that."

She blinked and, in that darkness, she could relive everything he had done, grabbing her around the throat, tearing her dress, plus every bruise he had given her. Then she saw the way he had lifted the pistol toward Francis and Louisa.

"No, I cannot mourn him," she said decisively, opening her eye again. She looked down at her mourning weeds and decided something with a small smile. "Let's go home, Louisa." Louisa smiled too.

Arm in arm, they walked away from the grave. Barely any mourners had come to Graham's funeral, and Phoebe was not bothered about being the last of them to stand by his grave. She hurried out of the graveyard first, with Louisa beside her, heading straight to the carriage that awaited them.

"Home, please," she called to the coach driver.

"Of course, my Lady," the coach driver said kindly as they climbed into the coach. Within seconds they set off, and Phoebe smiled as she looked out of the window. Travelling through London, the clouds were parting more and more, until they reached Hayward's estate, to find that it was completely bathed in sunlight.

"Do you intend to go back to Lord Ridlington's house ever again?" Louisa asked as they started riding down the estate driveway.

"No," Phoebe said with finality. "It was Graham's home, not mine. I went to see Mr Preston the other day and he is arranging for the house to be put on sale. My things will be moved out and we will not have to go back there again."

"Thank goodness for that!" Louisa said with relief. "The place has too many bad memories."

“Agreed,” Phoebe said, just as the carriage came to a stop.

The door was opened, but not by a footman, and the hand that came to assist Phoebe out of the carriage made her smile instantly.

“Francis?” she said in surprise as she took his hand. His fingers wrapped warmly around her own as he helped her out of the carriage. “Have you been waiting on the doorstep for our return?” she asked.

“It would be lying to say I hadn’t been,” he said, helping her down before he offered his hand to Louisa too. “There is something I must speak to you about.” He looped Phoebe’s arm through his and escorted her back toward the house.

Before Phoebe could reply, she turned her gaze to the house. They walked through the front door to see the staff were wandering to and fro, all quickly trying to prepare for the dinner they were to have that evening with Lord and Lady Dodge. It was to be a celebration of freedom.

Phoebe smiled as Mrs Goodman waved at her and the other staff waved too. After Graham’s death a few weeks ago, it was imperative the whole truth came out. Francis had decided to explain to his staff himself what had happened, to avoid any confusion. Since then, the staff had been extraordinarily kind to Phoebe, even more so than before. It meant that when Francis had asked her to stay living with him for a while, not to rush back home yet, she had heartily agreed.

This place feels like my home now.

“Can you spare a few minutes?” Francis whispered to her softly. Louisa hurried toward the staircase, giving Phoebe the minute that she needed alone with Francis. “I am struggling to wait much longer to say what I must say to you.”

“Can it wait a few minutes?” she asked quietly. “There is something I must do first.” She smiled with the words, confident in her

decision. "Meet me outside by the stables in half an hour?" she asked.

"You wish to ride Cantante?" he asked.

"I always do," she said with a small laugh. "But today...I think the freedom of riding that horse will matter even more than usual."

"As you wish. I'll see you there," he said. He looked as though he wanted to lift her hand and kiss the back, but then he glanced around the other staff that were passing them by and held off. She giggled at the sight of it. She wanted nothing more than to feel the press of his lips against her skin, but just like him, she wanted privacy for it.

"I'll meet you there," she promised and hurried off up the stairs, following Louisa.

When she reached the bed chamber and shut the door behind her, she turned to her maid with a great smile on her face.

"There, now," Louisa said, matching her smile. "That is a true smile of freedom."

"I am nearly free. There is one other thing I must do first," she said and heaved at the thick black skirt of the mourning dress. "Look at me, Louisa? Why am I wearing this? I do not mourn him, no more than he would mourn me had I been lost from this world. Wearing this...it's a foolish thing to do. It suggests I am still beholden to him, and I am not."

"You wish to change?" Louisa said excitedly. She clapped her hands together and rushed toward the wardrobe. "Wonderful! What would you like to wear instead? The blue gown? The green one? How about the new cream one?"

"The boldest one you can find!" Phoebe said with a giggle and threw off the mourning gown.



* * *

Francis was impatient for Phoebe's return, pacing up and down the stable yard as the new groom he had employed was preparing Cantante and another steed for their ride. His boots clopped across the cobbles each time he turned and walked back the other way.

Since Lord Ridlington's death, Francis had been restrained and given Phoebe the space she needed to move past the horror of what had occurred, but he couldn't hold himself back anymore. He loved her, absolutely, there was not a doubt in his mind, and he had no wish to live apart from her. The fact that she had agreed to stay in his house too suggested she had no wish to part from him.

Today is the day I stop waiting. He had a question to ask her, and it may not have been most aptly timed, but he had to ask it now.

"You look stressed," a soft voice said with a giggle. He turned his head round to see Phoebe was approaching him.

She was dressed in a fine blue riding gown, so bold and colorful that she was a direct contact to how she had looked the night he had first met her. The sight of her beauty, with the deep neckline and exposed forearms made his breath hitch.

"You are beautiful," he said softly. She blushed and smiled even more, holding his gaze as she walked toward him.

"You are too kind to me."

"Truly, I am not," he said, reaching for her. She placed her hands in his.

"You wished to say something to me?" she asked.

"I did, but..." He paused and looked toward the groom nearby. "First, come on a ride with me. What I have to say, I want to say to you alone."

She blushed and turned toward the Andalusian horse. He helped her up, unashamed to take hold of her waist and help lift her onto the horse. He was thrilled when she blushed even greater at his touch.

She is no longer separated from me...

He quickly mounted his own horse and soon they were off across the estate. They took the same path they had taken on their first ride together, through the estate and up to the trees, until they reached the very top of the hill, looking over the tops of the trees and down to the house. From here, they had their race toward the stream where he had fallen in. Francis smiled recollecting the moment. From that first day with her, she had been different and brought him happiness. Since then, despite the pain her husband had brought, she had always made him happy.

They came to a stop at the top of the hill both breathing heavily as he looked to her, seeing the wind had mussed the locks of her hair until they blew unbidden behind her. He jumped down from his horse and reached for her, saying nothing. She took the signal though and clambered down too, coming forward until she placed her hand in his.

"What is it you wished to say?" she asked, breathing so fast that her chest rose and fell with the movement.

"I once asked you this before," he said, clutching to both of her hands with their fingers interlocked. "I asked you to come away with me, and at the time, you were married."

"I was," she said, her lips flickering into a smile. "But I am not anymore."

"Thank god for that," he said, watching as she giggled under her breath. "Phoebe, I still wish to travel. I want to go to Egypt and

Italy, all those wonderful places, but I don't wish to go alone anymore. Come with me, Phoebe, but...this time, I don't ask you to come away with me in order to run from what is here. I am asking you to come as my wife."

Her eyebrows shot up and her lips parted.

"You're asking me to marry you?" she said softly, her voice such a whisper that he had to bend down to hear her.

"Goodness knows when I first fell in love with you, Phoebe, but I do not want to live without you now, and I rather think you like my company too." His jest brought a loud laugh from her.

"You can tell?"

"Just a little," he continued the joke, leaning down toward her. "I promise to make you as happy as you have made me since you came into my life. Marry me, Phoebe? Please?"

She bit her lip for a second, before lifting herself up on her toes. She reached toward him, touching her lips to his. Lost in that kiss, he pressed the two of them together, wrapping his arms around her waist and bringing her closer to him. When they parted, they were both breathless, clutching to each other.

"Is that a yes?" he asked, desperate to hear the words.

"Of course, it's a yes!" she said, giggling before reaching up to kiss him again.

Epilogue

Two Months Later

“Now the time has come to thank our congregation for coming to see the union of this man and this woman,” the vicar said.

Phoebe could barely stand still. She bounced on her toes, glancing just once to her left to see Louisa and Lady Dodge standing beside her, carrying bunches of flowers and looking as deliriously happy as she felt. She looked back to her right, to see Francis with his hand firmly in hers.

The smile on his cheeks was unlike anything she had seen him wearing before, with a thrilled contentment attached.

“What god hath joined, let no man put asunder,” the vicar said. “If you would please, all join me in presenting to you, Francis Gibbs, the Duke of Hayward, and his wife, Phoebe Gibbs, the Duchess of Hayward.”

A round of applause went up from the congregation as Phoebe looked to Francis.

He is my husband now!

The word filled her with excitement. For the first time, she would be able to think that word, husband, and feel love, instead of dread. It was the way it was supposed to be.

“You may kiss the bride!” the vicar declared with warmth.

“I’ve been waiting for that bit,” Francis whispered so only Phoebe could hear him. She giggled as he reached down toward her,

planting a chaste kiss to her lips. Despite the chasteness, Phoebe felt the thrill attached, for he passed his hand over hers, giving her a soft touch with his thumb to the underside of her wrist. It was a stolen intimate touch in the public affair.

As they pulled back from one another, the applause grew even greater and Francis pulled her arm through his, ready to escort her down the aisle.

“I want to make another vow to you,” he whispered to her, leaning down to her ear. “I promise to make every day of our married life together a happy one, and far better than your last marriage!”

“Married to you, I do not doubt it will be,” she whispered back. He smiled, the sight of it making her stomach somersault with excitement, before he planted another sweet kiss to her cheeks and stood straight, leading her down the aisle.

Phoebe smiled at everyone in the small church, realizing there was a space at the front of the aisle where someone should have been from her family, not that she cared very much. Her father had been charged with assault and attempted kidnap. Just a few weeks ago, she had gone to court and had to give not only her own witness testimony but watch as those she loved had to do so as well. That empty space reminded her of the father she could have had, and the man he had chosen not to be.

I will never have to fear him again.

She was going away for a while, far away not just from her father or her late husband’s house, but from England itself.

As she and Francis stepped outside of the church, there were flower petals thrown their way, by people who had gathered to see the ceremony. Phoebe looked around, seeing Mrs Goodman and other members of staff amongst them. Mrs Goodman was crying tears of happiness, trying to wipe away the tears across her cheeks.

“Well, I never thought I would see the day!” Lady Dodge’s voice

came from behind them. Phoebe turned to see Lord and Lady Dodge had followed them out of the church with Louisa at their side, who also had happy tears on her cheeks.

“What day?” Francis asked.

“The day you would get married,” she said, gesturing to him.

“It was bound to happen someday,” Lord Dodge said. “It was plain shortly after the Duchess moved in with him.”

Phoebe flinched in surprise.

Duchess...

It would take a while to get used to hearing herself addressed so.

“Well, I have you to thank for it, sister,” Francis said as he held tightly to Phoebe’s hand and pointed back to Lady Dodge. “Had you not encouraged me to house Phoebe, goodness knows where I’d be now.”

“Somewhere in Egypt, probably, but very lonely,” Phoebe said quietly.

“Very lonely indeed,” he said, lifting their joint hands between them and placing her hand to his, kissing the back. The thrill of that touched echoed through her.

“Talking of Egypt, we best get going if we’re going to get to the boat in time. Are you all set, Louisa?” Francis asked kindly.

“I am. I do not think I have ever been so excited for anything in my life!” she said between her tears of happiness. Phoebe smiled as she watched the friend whom she would always be grateful too.

Now, they had saved each other from men they did not want controlling their lives. That bond was something that would

connect them forever more, much to Phoebe's delight. The day she had told Louisa that she wanted her to come with them to Egypt and Italy, Louisa had cried with happiness for a full hour and jumped around the bed chamber, barely able to stand still.

"First, the wedding breakfast," Francis said and pulled Phoebe down the path. More people cheered and threw flower petals toward them. He lowered himself down a little and whispered in her ear. "And maybe a few stolen moments alone with you first."

She giggled as he placed a stolen kiss to the side of her neck.

As they walked away from the church and crossed the gate into the outer world, Phoebe felt how different the world had become. The last time she crossed this gate, she had gone to a world of misery and control, this time, she was about to explore the wider world, with a man at her side she loved more than any other.

"Thank God you spilled that drink down me at that assembly," she said with laughter as he led her toward the phaeton carriage that awaited them.

"You were sodden!" he said, chuckling too.

"But this might not have happened if it hadn't been for that."

"Perhaps it was meant to be then, Phoebe," he said, clambering up into the carriage and taking his seat beside her.

"Meant to be, perhaps it was," she said smiling, clutching to him, wondering what else the world had in store for them as the carriage pulled away.

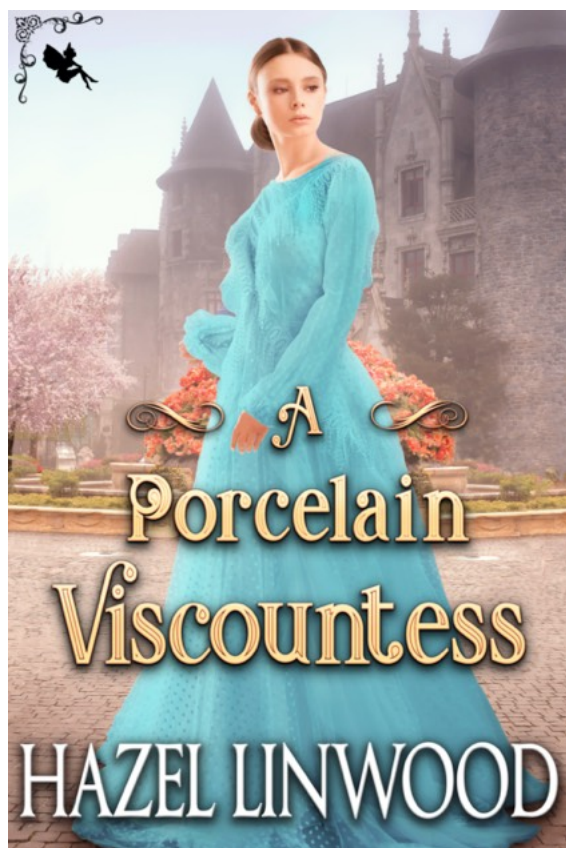
The End?

Extended Epilogue

Would you like to know how **Phoebe and Francis'** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

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Preview: Just a Marriage of Convenience with the Duke

Chapter 1

Bridget Stewart looked around at the schoolroom and smiled to herself. All around her, seated on cast-off chairs, empty wooden crates or overturned pails, children were bent over their tiles, practicing their letters or sums. Their clothes were threadbare, and there wasn't a shoe to be found among them, but they were diligently filling their heads with knowledge.

Christina Fitzroy, the teacher, and Bridget's best friend, looked up from where she was helping one of the younger pupils. She spoke one last word of encouragement as the girl struggled to properly hold the lumpy piece of chalk. Bridget felt a wave of sadness at the sight of the child trying to scratch the letters of her name against the jagged, misshapen piece of broken roofing tile that served as her slate.

"Come to see their progress?" Christina asked proudly as she came up to Bridget.

"Yes. It never ceases to amaze me how hard they are willing to work when they have so little," Bridget said, shaking her head. "I would have thrown these pitiful tools and fragile, old volumes across the room and stormed out by now."

"Don't feel too poorly. They have so much more than they would have had, all because of you," Christina reminded her, causing Bridget to duck her head at the praise. "You know, if it's not too rude of me to say, you do so much more than many of your class. Your father is but an earl and not astonishingly wealthy, from what you've mentioned. There are dukes with more money than the Crown who do not share so generously of what they have."

"It is only my dear mother's example that has led me to champion this school, wealth or not," she replied modestly. "Without all the years of learning at her knee how to be generous and caring—and my father being unable to refuse her anything, even the use of this drafty old factory of his—that seed of charity would never have

been planted in my heart.”

“Your mother was truly an astounding person,” Christina answered, patting Bridget’s shoulder. “At times, I cannot believe she’s been gone for five years now. In all the years that you and I have been friends, she never treated me as anything other than one of her own daughters.”

“And I can assure you, she thought of you every bit as one of her own.” Bridget spoke softly, as though remembering some long-forgotten story. “She always did wish to have an enormous family, a house filled with children. But she simply was not strong enough.”

“I’m certain that you and your sister were plenty of family for her,” Christina argued sweetly. “Speaking of which, where is Harriet?”

“She should be here very soon, she’s finishing her last round of calls today to request donations for the children,” Bridget confirmed. “I will see if she’s returned, and if she needs help bringing in any of the items she sought.”

Bridget left her friend to her work and walked away from the enormous classroom. She passed through a long and dismal hallway of work rooms that had been converted into a dining room for the children to take their meals, an infirmary where a nurse tended to illnesses and injuries, and two storerooms, one that held food staples and another that kept clothes, shoes, and sundry needs. Both of the storerooms were nearly empty, hence Harriet’s mission.

“Ah, Harriet! There you are,” Bridget said brightly as she stepped outside. Her face fell almost at once. “What’s all this?”

“It’s the best I could do,” Harriet said defensively. “I went to everyone I knew in the *ton* with my hand out like a filthy beggar, pleading for things for these children. But no one offered much help.”

Bridget eyed the small pile of gowns and trousers in the back of the wagon as Harriet climbed down from where she sat beside their father. She looked around disdainfully as she tried to find a path to the door that wasn’t swallowed by mud.

“Now, girls. Do not fret,” the Earl of Repington said as he lowered himself down as well. “I have a few friends we can also ask, surely

they won't refuse such an important cause."

Harriet huffed, rolling her eyes. "Do you know how humiliating it is to have to ask one's friends for their last Season's gowns or old books?"

"Harriet, you're not asking for your own sake, it's not as though you are penniless and needing their things," Bridget reminded her. "It should not be humiliating at all, as it is to help the less fortunate."

"Still, I feel as though people hide their silver when they see me coming," the younger sister groused. "They know I'm only calling so that I might bleed them dry for these... paupers."

Bridget stood taller and glared at her sister. "How dare you..."

"Now girls, let's not grumble," the earl said, putting an arm around each daughter's shoulder. "This school was very dear to your mother, and I am proud of you both for taking up the yoke now that she is—forgive me," he said, clearing his throat. "Now that she is gone."

Where her heart had been hardened only a moment ago, Bridget felt her anger at Harriet dissolve at once. Her poor father! How long would he endure such grief for the love that he lost?

"Yes, Father, you're right. I'm sorry, Harriet, I know you did your best and I am glad of your help. The children will be very grateful to have these things," Bridget said, trying to sound sincere.

Harriet still looked wounded as she turned to her father for more sympathy. The earl kissed each daughter on the forehead and smiled. "There now, everyone is happy again. I must go. Harriet, are you coming back to the house now?"

The younger sister eyed the wagon skeptically. "Would you send the carriage when you get home? The wagon is so... uncomfortable."

"Of course, my dear girl," the earl said, returning to the wagon and driving away.

"Unfashionable, you mean," Bridget accused under her breath after her father was out of earshot.

"Precisely," Harriet replied, not the least bit chastised by her sister's

remark. "You may think it acceptable to cavort about London in a worker's wagon, but I cannot risk anyone from the *ton*—certainly not any suitors—seeing me in such a way."

"I really am surprised at you, Harriet," Bridget said accusingly, turning to face her sister and looking her up and down, noting her pristine gown and fancy slippers. "There was a time when you were just as likely to be here helping these children as I was. What happened to you?"

"Bridget, my feelings about the children and what they need or deserved have not changed a bit," she answered, sounding defensive. "But has it occurred to you that one of us must put her mind to marrying well and marrying wealthy if you hope for this little school to remain open? Father has no sons! What is to become of both of us—and this project of yours—once he is gone and our horrid cousin inherits everything? Do you honestly believe that snotty little brat Albert and his disgusting mother will give you an annual sum to even support yourself, let alone this school?"

"Father's will is clear, Albert is required to give us a sum for as long as we have need of it," Bridget reminded her, though her heart did soften at the wisdom of her sister's explanation.

"That may be enough for you, but it is not enough for me. I have intentions to marry someone who is kind and mannered, someone who will provide for me and for our children. And once I do, I will be more than happy to become that patroness of your little charity. But I cannot do that if I am not a prize who must be won."

Bridget did not speak for a moment, pondering her younger sister's scheme. She wished for more for Harriet, more for herself as well. Shackling herself to a man simply because he had money and a title was not enough for her. A life of service to others was far more important—but Harriet was right.

"Sister, I am sorry I spoke crossly to you," Bridget conceded with a smile, affording Harriet some of the charity she so readily gave to others. "I would be proud to have you—the next Duchess of Whatever—to be the patron of this school."

Harriet sniffed as though gravely wounded by her sister's ill-treatment of her. "Then you shall have to earn that patronage. I

need you to style my hair for Agatha's ball tonight. You aren't planning to attend, are you?"

"I wasn't," Bridget said, sounding insulted, "but now that you ask me that question in such a hurtful way, I think I might!"

"You mustn't! How am I to catch the eye of an eligible suitor with my older but unmarried sister in attendance?" Harriet cried, clinging to Bridget's sleeve in fear.

"Oh, calm yourself, I was only teasing," Bridget replied, pushing Harriet's hand away. "But mind how you speak to me. I had just apologized to you for my own behavior when you first demanded my assistance and then insisted that I remain at home while you attend a ball! But Harriet, dear... you know that I must attend the ball."

"Why must you?" she moaned sadly.

"Agatha has so graciously agreed to host this ball to help our school, remember? Her parents thought it would be a good way to show her off while also making others see her as kind and caring. I cannot very well ask her to throw a ball to raise funds for the children and then not have the decency to attend."

Harriet groaned in an entirely unladylike manner. "All right. I'm sorry, you're right. But will you *please* help me with my hair? It must be perfect; I have seen the list of guests Agatha has invited and she has already informed three of the men that they must dance with me."

"Of course, I shall. But I do it as your loving sister, not in order to wave you about to the marriage market as though you were a fattened goose," Bridget joked, putting her sister's hand through her elbow and leading her inside. "Come, let us see all the fine things you've gathered for the children. I know they are very excited about having new things."

"These are not new things, they are items that others wished to discard," Harriet corrected haughtily.

"They are new to the children, and that's all that matters. Anything the children cannot wear, we shall send home for their parents."



* * *

“Good heavens, Patrick, what is that you’re wearing?” Lady Claire demanded from her chair near the window.

“Mother, leave him be,” the older duchess said, smiling at her son. “All the men are dressing in the latest fashions, and Patrick is no exception.”

“I don’t have to, you know,” Patrick said hopefully. “There is absolutely no need for me to attend a ball this evening. I could go and change, Grandmother.”

“Nonsense. We’re all attending this tacky display of beggary,” the duchess replied. “If we must attend—and Lord Kerrington was one of your father’s closest business associates, so we must—at the very least we can hope you will meet some young lady who attracts your attention.”

“A suitable one, this time,” Lady Claire added pointedly. “No more young ladies whose fathers have run through their fortunes and left them without dowries, if they ever had one to begin with.”

Patrick seethed. He had only been a duke for a short time, not even a year, and already his mother and grandmother were on the verge of arranging a match for him. Fortunately, he had no requirement to obey, though the constant discussion of his future wife and heirs was very tiresome.

“Father has not even been dead for a year,” he reminded them, attempting to keep his frustration under control. “It is not even seemly for me to *be* at a ball, let alone courting someone, when we are still supposed to be in mourning.”

“Nonsense,” the duchess replied primly, folding her hands in her lap. “Those sorts of ‘rules’ are all well and good when there is no crisis at hand. But you are unmarried and have no heir. Apart from the ever-increasing damage to your reputation that grows more

likely with each passing day, think of your grandmother and me, think of your younger sisters. There is no one to care for us if you do not hurry up and marry.”

“What do you mean, damage to my reputation? You’re the one attempting to make me look uncaring, almost as though I might have killed my father to get my hands on his title,” Patrick argued.

“No one would think such a horrible thing,” Lady Claire said with a polite sniff of derision. “You are much too kind to do such a thing. But if you do not marry well and marry soon, there will be those who think you must be a rake.”

Patrick’s cheeks flamed the color of late-season strawberries at such a statement from his grandmother. He looked to his mother as though she might put an end to such an inappropriate conversation, but she only nodded in agreement.

“This is beyond belief,” Patrick said, throwing up his hands in exasperation. “No one is even thinking these things, I assure you, much less speaking to them about me. And if they are, that is their own fault for engaging in idle gossip.”

“Oh? You think so?” the duchess asked, arching an eyebrow. She reached for the table beside her chair and retrieved a long, narrow page. “The scandal sheets might tell otherwise.”

Patrick took the page his mother held out and scanned its contents, his brows furrowing in anger as he made his way down the sheet. He fumed at the nearly slanderous tidbits, his humiliation growing as he thought of others reading these salacious words.

“This is reason enough not to show my face at Kerrington’s ball this evening. If you need me, I will be in my study,” Patrick said, handing back the offensive page and turning to leave.

“Patrick? No. You will be attending the ball,” his mother said coldly. “We depart at nine.”

Chapter 2

“Harriet, you look lovely,” Bridget said as her sister came down the stairs. “That gown fits you very well.”

“I suppose it does,” Harriet said, looking somewhat put out. “I cannot believe we couldn’t have new gowns for a ball that is being held for our family’s charity.”

“That’s precisely why we shouldn’t be parading about in new gowns,” Bridget reminded her. “We are hoping for the generosity of the guests to help our school. We cannot be wearing overly fine or expensive things while standing about with our hands out.”

Harriet stuck her tongue out at Bridget, but she ignored the younger girl’s disappointment as the earl emerged from the drawing-room.

“Are you ready, Father?” Bridget asked cautiously, looking at the sour expression on her father’s face.

“I suppose I am,” the earl answered, though he made no move to go to the door. He sighed mightily, then looked down. “Girls, I must bring you some very bad news.”

“What is it, Father?” Harriet asked, putting her gloved hand on his arm.

“I had hoped to keep this from you for as long as I could, but I cannot hide the truth any longer,” he said, darting his eyes up to look at them for only a moment before looking down once more, the shame clear in his voice. “Our fortunes have taken a turn, and I regret to say that the situation is rather dire.”

“What do you mean?” Bridget asked fearfully. “Just how dire is it?”

“We are virtually penniless,” he confessed slowly. “All of my solvency was held up in my latest shipments from Virginia, but the cargo proved to be worth far less than I anticipated. The price of timber did not reach as high as I was told to expect. That, and coupled with some of my debts coming due, we have been left with

nearly nothing.”

Bridget and Harriet exchanged a frightened look, struck speechless by this revelation.

“What will this mean?” Bridget asked quietly. “What of the servants?”

“I have sufficient funds to see to their salaries for the next few months, but after that, they will need to seek other positions,” the earl confessed. “The house is fully owned, but the taxes to the Crown will mean having to sell it.”

“Father, where will we live?” Harriet asked, clutching at his sleeve.

“There is still the house at Repington,” the earl said sadly, causing Harriet to sway slightly as she neared fainting. “But if that house must also be forfeited, then we will have to live at the barony your mother’s great-uncle left in our possession.”

“I would rather die!” Harriet cried indignantly. “To leave London and become a poor farm girl? I will never find a husband!”

“Well, it’s odd that you mention that,” the earl began, though he stopped short of finishing his thought.

Bridget stared, already knowing in her heart what he might say. Her blood ran cold as she pushed down the sickly feeling that began to take hold of her.

“Don’t say it,” Bridget whispered, but the earl only looked at her sadly and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, dear girl. The only way to guarantee your futures is to find an eligible match straight away. If you do not, this Season will be your last, I’m afraid.”

Harriet looked to Bridget, whose eyes were starting to fill with tears. She took a deep breath and steeled herself, summoning the strength to ease her father’s shame and hurt.

“We understand, Father,” Bridget said, her voice shaking slightly though she fought to keep her composure. “We will do our best and as always, we will make you proud.”

“Dear girl, I am so sorry about all of this. I am just... lost,” her father replied, his own eyes moist. “Your mother was always the one who helped me know what to do, how to invest and how to avoid business dealings that were not trustworthy. I’m afraid that without her, I’ve had to go into business blind, never knowing what to do. I’ve not only let the both of you down, but I’ve also let her down as well.”

“Father, do not chide yourself this way,” Bridget said. “Mother was certainly a rare gem, and you cannot berate yourself for not replicating her wise counsel. Let us go and see how this evening unfolds.”

Harriet wiped at her eyes and nodded, opening the door herself and slipping out into the night. Bridget turned to go after her, but the earl pulled her back.

“Bridget, I’m afraid that I have not told you the worst of it,” the earl said, looking crestfallen again. “It is bad enough that you now face this pressure to marry, and that I will undoubtedly have to make matches for you that you may not be pleased with. Lord Haskins, a man I have known in business for quite a few years now, has made mention of seeking a wife, by the by.”

“We will make do, Father,” Bridget said curtly, not wishing to hurt him further but unable to feel happy about it. “And so long as you promise to take into account our opinions on this man or that, I know we will all turn out all right.”

“No, I understand perfectly. That is bad enough, I suppose. But dear girl, there is one more piece of bad news I must share with you—your school must close its doors. I must sell the building to pay off the rest of my debts, so the children will have to leave at once.”



* * *

Patrick stood wedged between his mother and his grandmother,

watching the guests mill about and feeling terribly uncomfortable. The fact that this was a pointless ball was bad enough, but then knowing that everyone in the room had most likely read the brutal speculation about his immoral activities with a number of women made the event downright painful.

“Patrick, you must go and speak to your friends. You look ridiculous standing here with us this whole time,” his mother chided near his ear.

“What friends, Mother? The very people who would believe such rubbish if I am not married?” Patrick demanded bitterly. “And those same people who believe that marriage would somehow stop such depraved behavior? Are they addled in the head?”

“Well, you cannot stand here with the ladies. It is unseemly, and you will never meet a wife if you do not go and ask someone to dance. Just make sure it is someone suitable,” the duchess replied. “Come, Lady Claire, we will take a turn about the room and make Patrick available for conversing.”

His mother and grandmother gone, Patrick stood awkwardly and watched the other guests. There were quite a number of beautiful young ladies present, but they all had one feature in common—they watched him with an appraising eye, practically licking their lips like wolves about to devour a lamb. They could smell unmarried, titled blood it seemed, at least to him.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” a familiar, friendly voice said as a small glass of sherry was thrust into Patrick’s hand.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” Patrick said, taking a long sip of the drink. “I was afraid I wouldn’t know anyone... or would know too many people, that is.”

“That’s understandable,” Edward replied, clapping him on the shoulder jovially. “I wouldn’t be here except for my sister’s need for a chaperone. If she would hurry up and marry her betrothed, I could avoid these things altogether.”

“What is causing the delay?” Patrick asked, merely maintaining the conversation and not due to any real interest in the details involving his friend’s sister.

Edward shrugged. "She simply wishes to enjoy her last Season before being exiled to the man's properties in the north, I suppose. All of my other sisters are already married, thank heavens. I'm glad my father lived long enough to handle that nasty business for me."

"We make an odd pair, do we not? Titled young men who had no cares in the world not too long ago, only to find ourselves now burdened like Atlas after our fathers were taken too soon."

"Your father, perhaps," Edward conceded. "I was my father's fifth child—at least the fifth one who survived—and his only son after a string of daughters. He was already advanced in years when he married my mother, so I have never known him except that he was gray-haired and walked with a cane. It is sad, and I miss him terribly, but I cannot honestly say it was unexpected."

"True enough," Patrick admitted. "But now I find myself in the unenviable position of being thrown before the wolves myself. My mother and my grandmother have made it rather clear that there is already scandal attached to my name, all because of my bachelorhood. It is a dreadful condition that I am to be cured of in the very near future."

"I do not envy you that," Edward said, laughing openly at his best friend's situation. "It is rare that I am glad to be a lowly marquess, but this is certainly one of those times. When I marry it shall be at a time of my choosing and to a young lady of my choosing. Anyone who thinks otherwise will be told to have off."

"I admire your confidence," Patrick said. "Would you care to speak on my behalf to my own relations?"

"Not even for a moment. Those two women frighten me," Edward said, laughing. "Come, let's speak to James over there. He always has something amusing to say."

As they made their way through the ballroom, Patrick was keenly aware of whispers every time he passed someone. Clusters of ladies seemed to speak of him behind their fans, watching him with wide eyes. Men he did not know watched him warily, offering only the barest of nods in greeting. The whole thing made him wish to turn around and flee for the front door, not stopping until he was back at home.

“Well then, do you see anyone who catches your eye?” Edward asked helpfully.

“I failed to look as I was otherwise occupied with everyone whispering about me,” Patrick admitted sheepishly.

“Why would you think they’re whispering about you? Because of that ridiculous scandal sheet from yesterday?”

“Of course. I know they’ve all seen it, Mother said as much.” Patrick shook his head angrily at the memory of their conversation.

“And you think those ludicrous remarks have set the *ton*’s tongues to wagging?” Edward asked, laughing lightly. “Lockhart, you must remember something. No one at all thinks there’s a shred of truth to those pages.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, the slightest stirring of hope lifting his spirits.

“They are mere entertainment, something for the *ton* to grab onto and discuss,” Edward explained. “Now, to be sure, should a young lady have been ruined and the news of it works its way into the circulation of local rumors, that would certainly be a problem... at least for her. But one of the many injustices heaped upon the fairer sex is that they must suffer should their every indiscretion be made public, while we gentlemen become all the more alluring for having been mentioned. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if your own mother was the one to inform the writer of your alleged behaviors.”

“What? My mother would never do such a thing, she lives in abject fear of a scandal causing us harm,” Patrick argued, shaking his head. “It’s simply not possible.”

“My dear naïve friend, it’s not only possible, but it’s also entirely likely she paid a few coins to have something printed about you. Why else would everyone suddenly know your name and be discussing you?” Edward asked, gesturing to a handful of guests who were looking in their direction. “Tell me, has that ever happened at an event before?”

“Well, no. Now that you bring my attention to it, I don’t recall ever being so openly gawked at like an animal in a cage,” he said, still looking around uncomfortably.

“And yet, your name is on everyone’s lips this evening. How unusual...” Edward said knowingly, his voice trailing off as he made his point.

Patrick was both relieved and repulsed by the notion that being spoken of in such a poor way could possibly be a good thing. Still, it did nothing to alleviate his discomfort at standing in a ballroom filled with people, some of whom might admire him and others who may loathe him.

All feeling seemed to leave him at once when Patrick chanced to see the hosts of the ball enter and begin greeting their guests. He had known Lord Kerrington for some time, along with Lady Kerrington and their daughter, Agatha. They were nice enough people, though he did not know them beyond being acquaintances. It was the young ladies who trailed after them who caught his eye, two unknown ladies who smiled and received introductions as they went along the far wall.

“Who is that? I’ve never noticed her before,” Patrick asked his friend, never taking his eyes off the tall young lady with the chestnut hair that fluttered with hints of red as the candles flickered in their sconces above her.

“I don’t know,” Edward replied, sounding somewhat disinterested. “You should probably go and find out, lest your mother accuses you of not even trying to be civil.”

“I think I shall,” Patrick said, only to find his feet firmly frozen to the floor when the worst sort of scoundrel he knew stepped forward and took the young lady’s hand, beckoning her to dance.

Chapter 3

“Lady Bridget,” the older man said, an odd sort of look in his eye.

It took her only a moment for Bridget to realize he had been drinking for quite some time, and most certainly something stronger than sherry. She had seen it far too many times in the faces of the students’ parents, that same bleary-eyed stare in which their gaze kept wandering, trying to find something to focus on.

“Yes? Have we met?” Bridget asked a little too loudly, hoping to garner Agatha’s attention.

“Oh, Lady Bridget, how clumsy of me,” Agatha replied, turning from where she’d been speaking to her parents. “Lord Haskins, may I introduce Lady Bridget Stewart, daughter of the Earl of Repington? Lady Bridget, this is Victor Skinner, the Earl of Haskins.”

“Pleased to meet you, my lord,” Bridget said, curtsying politely.

“I see you are not dancing,” Lord Skinner replied. “We must fix that at once.”

Bridget looked to Agatha and Harriet, unsure of what to make of such an unusual invitation to dance. But her father’s words rang in her ear—she simply had to marry by the end of this Season. And this very man had made mention of seeking a wife, a man of business, according to her father. Gritting her teeth but smiling politely, she nodded briefly.

“Certainly, my lord. I should like nothing better,” she answered, placing her hand on his outstretched arm.

The first notes of the next tune began and around her, couples were already standing in their places. Bridget stood before this man and tried to avoid the intensity of his stare.

“Why have I never seen you at an event before?” he asked gruffly as they began to move about the floor.

"I... that is to say, I don't know. I've been to a number of events lately, most recently the concert at Lady Falson's and the opera with Lady Melville," Bridget explained, trying to sound polite and attentive.

"I would surely have noticed someone as beautiful and beguiling as you wandering about the halls," Lord Haskins said. "I would have made every effort to follow after you and speak to you."

"Oh. You flatter me," Bridget replied, not sure how to respond to such a statement.

"It is no flattery. I know when I see the most prized specimen in the room," he argued, stumbling momentarily but keeping his feet about him.

"Specimen?" Bridget asked, cringing slightly as her anger threatened to get the better of her. "I assure you, I am no specimen, at least not one to be compared to all of the ladies in attendance. They are far more prized than I, I assure you."

"Nonsense. I know what I like, and I have not seen it until now," the earl said, pulling Bridget slightly closer to him until she felt the need to lean backwards in order to avoid being so close to him.

Mercifully, the song ended in due course. Bridget curtsied again and looked over the earl's shoulder for Harriet or Agatha.

"Thank you for the dance, my lord. I must find my sister now," Bridget began, but Lord Haskins caught her hand and pulled her back.

"Now, now, you mustn't run off, not when I've only just gotten to know you," he said, but he was prevented from saying anything else by another man's intrusion.

"Why, Lady Bridget, I had no idea you would be here this evening," the newcomer said, causing Bridget's nerves to alight once more. "Please tell me I'm not too late, and that I might have the next dance."

Bridget looked between the drunken earl and this strange man who seemed to know her, feeling oddly discomforted. Still, sobriety was a characteristic she was particularly attached to, so the choice was

simple.

“Certainly, you may. If you will excuse us, Lord Haskins,” Bridget said, putting her hand atop the stranger’s gently closed fist and allowing him to lead her away.

They stood apart, facing one another as the next tune began to play. Bridget looked up at the tall man, his dark curls almost falling over his forehead enough to cast a shadow that reached his intensely green eyes. She frowned slightly, trying to discern how they knew one another, but she was unsuccessful.

“Don’t trouble yourself with trying to recall my name, we have never met. I hope you’ll forgive me for being overly familiar,” the man said as they began to dance. “I asked your friend for your name when I saw how uncomfortable you seemed.”

Bridget smiled with relief. “That was very clever of you. Here I thought I was a terrible person for not remembering you.”

The man laughed. “We have not yet been introduced, and it pains me that my rather forward display was how we were to meet. But I am familiar with Lord Haskins and his fondness for drink. I could not leave you to your own defenses.”

“You are a true hero, rest assured,” Bridget replied, relief flooding through her. “But I am at a loss as you know my name, though I still have not learned yours.”

“Patrick,” the man said simply.

“Patrick? That’s all?” Bridget teased, smiling at how unassuming this man seemed to be.

“Oh, my apologies. I’m sure I’m supposed to inform you that I am Patrick Arnold, eleventh Duke of Lockhart, or some such thing,” he answered, smiling politely though he rolled his eyes at the formality.

“Well, Your Grace, you certainly saved me and for that, I am very grateful to you,” Bridget replied sincerely. “Though I have heard of you, my father has spoken of you before. You are both members at White’s, I believe.”

“Ah, I remember now. So, while inquiring about your name, I

learned that you are here as a special guest of the hosts. Is that so?" the duke pressed, as though hurrying to speak while they had the brief chance.

"Yes. You see, I run an academy for children of poor laborers. This ball is an invitation to anyone in the *ton* who wishes to lend their support to our cause. We have need of a great many things, but most of all, funds to maintain our school." Bridget stopped herself before she could confess that the very existence of the school was now in peril.

"I see. That is not a common endeavor you've undertaken," Patrick replied.

"No, sadly, it is not. If it were more common, there would be so much less need," Bridget explained, aware that she was sounding defensive of her school. "But we are so much more than simply a school. We strive to provide food and clothing as well as a rudimentary education. It is... not an inexpensive undertaking."

"Surely the fine people in attendance this evening will see the merit in such a cause and help you," Patrick replied. "I, for one, will be glad to make a modest donation."

"Thank you, Your Grace. That will be most welcome. And if you feel so inclined, it would be a great help to the school if you could speak to any of your peers about also supporting us. But only if you feel comfortable doing so, that is," Bridget added quickly.

"I don't know that I have so many acquaintances here, but I will do all I can to talk it up. How about that?" he asked, smiling slightly.

Before Bridget could answer, the musicians stopped. The dancing ceased, and the duke looked down at her.

"Thank you for the lovely dance, Lady Bridget," he said. "I wish you the very best for your school, and I know that you will continue to do a marvelous job with it."

Bridget looked up at his eager face, and her heart was filled with the sort of turmoil that comes from trying to be strong for too long. He had been so kind as to rescue her from a loathsome dancing partner, and then even spoke so kindly about the school. It was overwhelming to have the chance to speak to someone who seemed

to be such a caring person.

The truth spilled out before Bridget could stop herself.

“I’m afraid that unless our campaign is successful, the school will be closing,” she confessed, a single tear spilling down her cheek. “I have learned only this evening that it must close if we do not achieve our aim. Forgive me,” she blurted out, then hurried out of the ballroom.



* * *

Bridget made it outside to the solitude of the terrace before the full shame of humiliation struck. What had she been thinking? She had just revealed her sad plight to a complete stranger, one who had just spoken such wonderful things about the school!

“How stupid can I be?” Bridget muttered, looking up at the stars overhead and attempting to hold back the tears that continued to fall. “I just ruined any chance the children had of keeping their school!”

Bridget rested her cheek against the cool marble of the balustrade for a moment, letting the soothing stone calm her. She would have to go back inside and continue speaking to the guests about the merits of the school and the good work that they were doing, all while trying to politely ignore the comments from those who thought poor children should simply be put to work somewhere.

“Lady Bridget? Are you all right?” a now-familiar voice asked from behind her.

Bridget whirled around in surprise to find the duke standing nearby. She dabbed at her eyes and smoothed the front of her gown before self-consciously reaching up to pat her hair, ensuring it was not a mess from her sprint earlier.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m sorry, I just became so overwhelmed with

emotion at finally telling another soul the awful news,” Bridget explained, her embarrassment mercifully concealed by the darkness outdoors.

“There is no need to apologize, I assure you. I would react the same way if I had received such terrible news, especially about something I was so clearly passionate about as a school for needy children,” Patrick said softly, his voice filled with understanding.

It made Bridget want to cry all over again.

“You are very kind to inquire after me, but I promise, I am all right. I only need a moment to stop feeling so helpless,” Bridget said. “Who am I to cry and complain while standing on Lord Kerrington’s terrace, wearing a gown that cost more than the children’s families could ever hope to afford?”

“That is an uncommon sentiment among this crowd, I fear,” Patrick said, laughing though he sounded sympathetic.

“I cannot help but imagine their little faces as they slink off to their beds, their bellies empty once again but for the meager food we can give them each day,” Bridget continued. “And to know that even that small bit is now threatened with being taken away, it is too painful to grasp.”

“What will you do without securing the funds?” Patrick asked, sounding concerned.

“The school building itself will be up for sale, and the children will have to remain at home. Instead of learning and finding encouragement and nourishment, they will likely be put to work to keep them from being idle.”

“Is there no other school for them?” the duke asked, genuinely unaware of how these sorts of matters came about.

Bridget shook her head. “No. As I explained before, this school is far too unique in our society.” She paused and looked away. “While I am baring the troubles of my heart, I might as well say this—my family has supported this school for all the years that it has existed, with very little help from others. But my father... he has fallen on unfortunate financial hardships, and that is the reason the school is to close. We simply cannot afford to continue to fund it.”

"That is terrible," Patrick said, standing closer and lowering his voice at discussing such a personal topic. "But surely once your father's finances are secure once again, the school can open."

"I'm afraid it is not so simple as that. He must sell the school, you see. His situation is quite serious, and my sister and I must do all we can to ease his burden."

"You don't mean..." Patrick asked, though he stopped as though he knew the topic was not meant for two strangers to discuss. Finally, he said, "You mean you must marry, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so," Bridget replied, trying to sound confident. "It is through no fault of my father's, and therefore it is my duty as his daughter to do all I can. I'm sure he will find a suitable match before the Season is over, and then he will not have to worry about caring for either of his daughters."

Patrick was silent, and for a few moments, Bridget thought she might have spoken too plainly, said too much. These topics were not meant to be discussed so casually among strangers, nor even among friends, for that matter. But it felt good to let someone else shoulder that burden with her, even if it was someone she'd only just met and would likely not see again.

"Then marry me," Patrick said, turning to face Bridget.

Her eyes went wide. "I beg your pardon? What did you say?"

"Please hear me," he explained cautiously. "I must marry. Apparently, my mother and grandmother will both die of something horrendous if I fail to do so... or at least that is how they have been acting. And I have been having a terrible time of simply trying to enjoy my days as a solitary person. You need to marry and maintain your school, and I need a wife to avoid the appearance of being a monstrous rake, or something like that. This is ideal for both of us."

"You cannot be serious," Bridget said, confirming that she'd heard him correctly. "Dukes do not simply meet a young lady at a ball and offer marriage right that very moment."

"Why not?" he asked with a shrug. "It's not as if either of us has been seeking a love match, correct? Then what is the harm in a business arrangement that will benefit both of us? Of course, we

can still enjoy a brief yet respectable courtship so that everyone knows it is a most sincere arrangement.”

“I... I don’t know. But I’m certain there is more to it than that,” Bridget said, protectively crossing her arms in front of herself.

“The way I see it, it’s all rather simple,” Patrick said plainly. “The *ton* is filled with men like Lord Haskins. Would you prefer to continue attending events in hopes of meeting a man who is slightly less repulsive?”

“Absolutely not. You have certainly discovered my Achilles’s heel,” Bridget acknowledged.

“Then a marriage arrangement built on mutual benefit—both financial and to our reputations—is the better choice, is it not?” he asked patiently, as though waiting for Bridget to embrace the notion.

“But am I even permitted to accept such an invitation? I truly do not know these things, my mother has not been here to guide me through these matters,” Bridget admitted. “I think you are supposed to speak to my father about this, rather than me.”

“Oh. I think you’re right,” Patrick said, his eyes going wide as he looked around nervously. Yet still, he smiled. “I’ll be right back then.”

“Wait, I don’t mean like that!” Bridget said, laughing as she caught his arm and pulled him back. “I feel as though I should ask about you, about your reputation. What if you are some rake who is intent on ruining my good name?”

The duke stiffened at her remark, and Bridget feared she had either offended him greatly... or worse, that she had hit too close to the mark.

“I assure you, despite what others may think they know, I am an honorable and honest man,” he answered, sounding slightly wounded.

Bridget softened, her heart going out to him. “I think it’s permitted for me to accept, but only on the condition that you come to call tomorrow and speak to my father. Does that sound right?”

“It does to me,” Patrick answered. “You know, for the first time in a matter of weeks, I feel as though I might float off the ground, so unbothered am I.”

“I think I feel the same way,” Bridget said, laughing softly. “It’s as though you saved me not only from a boorish dance partner, but also... you’ve saved my entire life.”

“And I hope that I live up to such a lofty view you have of me, Lady Bridget,” Patrick answered, bowing to her. “Now, I’m certain we should go back inside before anyone sees us out here alone. And as I have asked you to be my wife, I do believe we are permitted one more dance this evening. Shall we go?”

“That would be lovely, Your Grace,” Bridget said, accepting his arm and walking with the duke back into the house.

Want to know how the story ends?

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Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

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